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ADVENTURES



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murder when he used ...

EXCALIBUR and the ATOM by **THEODORE STURGEON**

Excalibur and the Atom

Theodore Sturgeon

In a face that was a statement of strength, two deep lines formed parentheses. They enclosed a mouth that was a big gentleness. Into the mouth he thrust the soggy end of the pretzel stick he had been dunking in his coffee. He grunted. The classified ad read:

Lose something? Or maybe you want something found. Or maybe you just want something. Convince me it exists, pay my expenses, and I'll charge you a fee for finding it. Hadley Guinn, HE 6-2420.

"A hell of a way to get business," he said to the coffee container. It had two flyspecks and a brown stain that together looked like a grinning rat. "Go ahead," he growled. "Laugh."

She came in then, straight through the waiting room into his office. "Hadley Guinn?" She had a voice to go with olive skin, the kind with a glow under it.

"You read signs on doors?"

"I still have to ask questions. You forgot to wear your dog-tag." She came forward and sat down. She moved across the floor as if she were on tracks. She sat down as if she were folding wings.

"Have a wet pretzel?"

"Thanks, no. I just threw one away." She regarded him evenly. She had not smiled, she had not raised a brow or arched a nostril. She was everything in the world that was completely composed. She was about twenty, with blue-black hair. Her blue eyes didn't belong with that complexion at all. They didn't belong with her age either. They were wise eyes. They were ten thousand years old. She wore a black dress with a built-on cape around her shoulders and a neckline down to here. She used a brown-red lipstick that went with the skin but not at all with the eyes or the dress. On her it looked fine.

"Reckon it'll rain tomorrow?" he asked eventually.

She took the remark at face value. "Not in Barenton."

"Where's Barenton?"

"Sorry" she said. "Classical reference. There's a hawthorne bush

there.”

“Would that be the one you’re beating around?” The thick lashes did not bat. “You can find anything?”

“I’m near enough to being legal to be able to handle the language,” he said. He quoted: ” ‘Convince me it exists...’ ”

“I see. If it’s too much trouble, you’re not convinced.”

He quoted: ” ‘...pay my expenses...’ ”

“Mmm. And then the fee comes automatically.”

“When I find it. You examine more clauses than the guy who manicures for Clyde Beatty.”

She said, deadpan, “That job really gives one pause.”

His appreciation was in his eyes and in the parentheses. He left it there. “It was nice of you to drop in, Miss Jones.”

“Morgan,” she said.

He drained the container, crushed it, filed it in the wastebasket. He swept the remaining pretzel sticks into the drawer. “Lunch time’s over,” he explained. “Shall we dance?”

“Not while we have to watch our steps...What’s your special signal that means you’re about to go to work?”

“I answer a businesslike question.”

She nodded. “Want to find something for me?”

He waited.

She said, coolly, “Want to find something for me if I convince you that it is, and pay your expenses?”

He said nothing.

“In advance?”

“Certainly,” he said.

“Very well. I’m looking for a stone. It’s a big one—seven or eight karats. Not a diamond. A diamond looks like a piece of putty beside it. It glows in the dark.”

“Where is it?”

She shrugged.

“Well, is it loose, or in a ring, or what?”

“It’s on a cup. It looks like gold, but it isn’t. The cup holds about a quart, and it has a five-sided pedestal and a five-sided foot.”

He closed his eyes, looked at the mental picture her words drew, and said, “Got a lead?”

“There’s a man in town who almost had it once. His name’s Percival.”

Guinn reached under the desk and scratched his lower shinbone. “You mean the Caveman?”

“That’s the man.”

“Hell. He doesn’t have any use for baubles. He doesn’t even believe in money.”

“You meet all kinds of people,” she said gently.

“All right. I’ll go see him. What else do you know about this cup?”

“What do you want to know?”

“Where did it come from? Where was it last seen? Why do you want it?”

“No one knows where it came from. The stone is supposed to have come from the sky. The cup was made in the Middle East more than two thousand years ago. It’s been seen only twice, and that was too long ago to bother about. I do know it’s been seen near here. As for why I want it...” The wise eyes looked deep into his. “I want it very badly,” she whispered.

The intensity of her gaze, of her voice, gave him a genuine shock. It was the first break in her incredible composure and he hadn't been ready for it.

"I'll look for it," he said.

She stood up. "Here's five to start with."

He watched her open her purse. "Five? Don't knock yourself out, Miss Morgan."

"There'll be more when you need it," she said. She put five bills down on the desk. They were C-notes.

"It's that important?" he asked.

"At least that important," she said soberly.

"Guys get killed over things that important."

"Lots of guys have gotten killed over this." She looked at him for a moment. "Shall I pick up those bills now?"

"Allow me," he said graciously. He scooped them, stacked them, fingered his smooth brown wallet out of his hip pocket and slipped the money into it. "Now tell me more."

She looked him straight in the eye and shook her head very slowly, twice. Her eyes, her wise eyes, slid in their long sockets as her head moved. "It's your cooky, Guinn."

He shrugged. "You're just going to make me use up more of your expense money. What's your first name?"

"Morgan."

"All right, if you don't want to tell me. Where can I get in touch with you?"

"For the time being," she said coolly, "I'll worry about that." She stood up. "Be careful."

"Should I really be careful?"

"I keep telling you," she said, "this job isn't just difficult." She

turned and walked out.

When she got to the outer door, he called her: "Miss Morgan!"

"Yes?"

"Goodbye."

She set the shoulder strap of her bag and passed the doorknob from one hand to the other as she sidled through it. "You're so formal," she said, and was gone.

Guinn sat staring at the door. His face was completely impassive; he was suddenly conscious of it, that he was imitating hers. He grunted loudly, spread one big hand and drummed the desk top, once.

He saw the girl called Morgan crossing the sidewalk. He knew how women walked. He'd never seen one move like this. He wondered some things about her and then felt his wallet without taking it out. He bent it; his sensitive fingers could feel it crackle. They were nice new bills.

He shook his head and went back to the desk. From the second drawer he took a shoulder harness and strapped it on. In the middle drawer were two guns. He took the dull-gray .32 and slipped the magazine out. He ejected the shell that was in the breech, pressed it into the magazine and, holding the cocking-piece back, twisted the breech-block and broke the gun. He sighted the bore to the window, nodded, and deftly put the gun together again, returning the top cartridge to the breech. He dropped it into the holster, picked up the other gun, thought for a moment and then put it back. It clinked. He bent, peered, palmed out a four-fifths of rye. He sighted it exactly and as carefully as he had the gun-bore, then put it back in the drawer.

He went to the door, felt for his keys, thumbed the spring catch. The bolt shot out with a disapproving tsk! He pulled at his square chin, returned to the desk, opened the middle drawer again and found an unpaid telephone bill in a well-thumbed envelope. He took out his wallet, put three of the C-notes in with the bill, and dropped the envelope back in the drawer. He felt the bottle staring at him, muttered, "If that's the way you feel," and resentfully drank from it. There were only a couple of fingers left. Then he went out and

slammed the door behind him.

It wasn't quite two o'clock.

There was a two-year-old station wagon on the street that looked as if it had run two hundred thousand miles and rolled sidewise the last four. A lean youth sat on the front fender with his feet on a fireplug. On the pavement by the plug were four dog-eared cheesecake magazines.

Guinn asked him, "What goes, Garry? You take the pledge?"

The youth looked down at the magazines. "Those I don't need," he said, and flashed a sudden, loose-lipped grin. He had clumped hair that looked like the oozings at the top of a cotton-bale, and steel-gray eyes that were very pale pink all around the edges. "I just seen a chick, hey. She has hair like this, see," and he made a motion as if he were saluting with both hands at once, "and it's so black it's blue. She's stacked like wheatcakes, but with honey. Mostly, she's got a face like a pyramid."

"You mean a sphinx."

"Same thing. So why should I look at pictures? Hey—you know her, hey?"

Guinn reached in through the window of the station wagon and opened the door. "A client." He got in.

Garry trotted around the street side, grasped the window frame, and pulled. The door opened and sagged. He got in, lifted the door and pulled it until it latched, and tramped on the starter. The motor responded instantly and quietly. "Yeah, huh," said Garry enthusiastically. "What's she want?"

Guinn said shortly, "Just because this wagon's a dog doesn't mean you have to keep it by a hydrant all the time. Let's go."

The car moved forward. Garry said, "Is she—"

"Take the hill road and turn off at the Spur."

Garry nodded. "Will she—"

“I changed the subject twice,” said Guinn.

Garry tightened his lips and raised his eyebrows in a facial shrug. Guinn sat silently, his big hands lax on his knees, his eyes on the road.

After a time he said, “I mean that about the fireplugs.”

“Well,” said Garry, “I got to have some place to put my feet.”

“Put ‘em in your pockets.”

About two miles further on Garry asked, “Now, how am I going to do that and keep my pants on?”

The two lines at the corners of Guinn’s mouth deepened. Suddenly he straightened. “Slow down.”

There was a girl on the road, hobbling painfully along toward them. Guinn said, “That kid’s hurt...no; busted a heel off. Stop, Garry.”

He leaned out. “Something wrong, sister?”

She made no effort to approach the car. “I’m all right.” She wore a strapless sun-back dress that flared out at the hips. She was a copper blonde with angry green eyes. Her left hand clutched the top hem of the dress; in her right she held a limp handbag made of the same purple linen as her dress.

“The hell you are,” said Guinn. He peered at her. “Don’t I know you? Your name’s...Lynn.”

She sighed and crossed the road shoulder. “That’s right. I deal off the arm at Crenley’s Cafeteria. You’re that detective in the Miles Building.”

“What’s the matter?”

The slight identification seemed to make a large difference. She came close to the car. She wiped her brow with the back of the hand that held the bag. “It’s real hot,” she said with a small smile, as if apologizing for the weather. “Oh, I just guessed wrong. Day off, fellow says it’s a nice day for a spin, get ‘way out in the country, and

suddenly I get an offer. Or walk.” She shrugged, clutched tighter at her neckline. “I walked.”

“There was some wrestling,” said Guinn.

“Uh-huh. Tore my dress, the stinker. For that I wiped off his collarbone with his ear.

“Good.” He looked at his watch. “I don’t have much time to run you back in. Have to spend most of the afternoon up on the Spur. But I should be back in town before seven. You’re welcome to come along.”

She hesitated, looked down the hot, dusty road toward the town and then at the inviting shade inside the station wagon. Then, “Why not?” she said. “I’m off till tomorrow. Gosh, thanks, Mr. Guinn.”

He reached back and opened the door and she climbed in. Garry let in the clutch. Lynn said, “That feels good, that breeze.”

Guinn fumbled in the glove compartment. “There ought to be—yeah—here it is.” His hand closed on a small plastic case which he passed back to the girl. “Sorry I don’t seem to stock your color.”

“Wh—Oh! A needle and these little rolls of thread. You are a Boy Scout!”

“Yeah, huh,” muttered Garry.

Lynn said, “Don’t look around, will you? I’m not...not wearing anything under this, and if I’m going to sew it from the inside I’ll have to pull it right down.”

“Go ahead,” said Guinn.

They bowled along in silence through the hot afternoon. The right-hand wheels rumbled on the shoulder, sang again on tarmac. They rumbled again. Guinn looked up sharply to see Garry’s eyes fixed on the rear-view mirror. He reached up and turned it on its swivel and with the same movement snapped his thumbnail so hard on the bridge of Garry’s nose that tears came to the driver’s eyes. Neither man said a word, and Lynn was apparently too busy to notice.

They turned off on the Spur road and began to climb. At the second hairpin the blacktop ceased. At the fourth there were no more retaining walls. At the seventh the road had yielded up its last cottage driveway and was a two-track meander through neglected hilltop fields. In the middle of one of these Garry stopped the car.

“More?”

“Go ahead,” said Guinn.

“You know,” said Garry resignedly, and inched over the track until the car poked its battered snout into woods. Garry glanced at Guinn, who sat as if in deep thought and gave no orders. The car moved through underbrush and there, abruptly, was the track again, winding through the woods.

“Oh, how lovely!” said Lynn.

It was certainly restful; an underwater-green light, sun-spangled in shifting patches of gold.

“Whoa.”

There was a glitter of chrome ahead, as offensive as a belch in a theater audience. Garry braked. Guinn stared thoughtfully at the low-slung Town-and-Country convertible which blocked the track a hundred shaded yards ahead, and at the gray rock outcropping beyond it. There was a flash of white; a baby goat curvetted on the rocks, then another and another.

“Pull ‘way over,” said Guinn. “Far enough so that Chrysler can get out if he wants to. But keep your eye on him.”

There was a sound from Lynn—a quickly checked almost-syllable. Guinn swung around.

She was staring at the convertible, sitting bolt-upright, and her green eyes were round. “What is it, Lynn?”

“I could be wrong, but I think that’s the—the fellow who—”

“We’ll take care of him.”

“Oh, please. I don’t want any trouble.”

Garry turned around and said jovially, “Oh, it won’t be any trouble, miss.”

He tooted the car between the trees and got it off the road. Guinn watched him narrowly. He’d known that combination of joviality and slitted eyes from ‘way back. “Garry—”

“I don’t like to see women pushed around,” said Garry. He switched off.

Guinn got out, closed the door, leaned his elbows on the window ledge. “Lynn...”

She took her apprehensive eyes from the convertible. “Mmm?”

“You’ll be all right with Garry. He’s harmless. He likes to look, but he’s afraid to touch.” He thumped Garry’s shoulder. “If anyone shoots at you,” he told him, “try to catch the slug in your head, where it won’t make any difference.”

Garry laughed with the same ominous cheerfulness. “How soon’ll you be back?”

“Shortly.” He turned away and struck into the woods at about forty-five degrees away from the road.

He worked his way carefully, keeping a constant watch on the convertible and on the area between it and the rocks. Nothing moved. There was no one in sight in or around the Chrysler when he drew abreast of it. He made no attempt to get closer, but moved steadily toward the rocks. Once he stopped and listened. He made another fifty feet and stopped again. There was a high, thin cry, faint and close. It sounded like a hoarse-voiced three-year-old child repeating a single vowel sound: Ei-ee! Ei-ee!

He stepped into the clearing around the rocks. Out of the corner of his eye something dark flashed out of sight around a projection in the gray stone.

Guinn slid back into the brush and waited. He reached inside his

jacket and fingered the butt of his .32.

The black thing barely showed, disappeared again.

Hollow, faint, near, insistent came the childlike Ei-ee...ei-ee...ei-ee...

Guinn lifted his gun, kicked off the safeties, crouched lower.

Explosively, the black thing leaped out into the open. Guinn's breath caught in his throat and he quelled the trigger reflex of his right hand by an enormous application of will. A black goat kid pranced into the open, ran and leapt high over some invisible obstacle created in its own fantastically playful imagination, hit the ground with all four feet together, back arched, head down. It gave an infantile snort and raced away, its little hooves making astonishingly soft little sounds on the rocks, like a cat's feet on parquet flooring.

"Percival!" Guinn called.

Ee-ee...ei-ee...

From the woods came the sound of a starter. Not the station wagon, for the motor turned over all of four times before it caught, a delay that Garry wouldn't stand for in anything he drove. Must be the Chrysler.

Guinn hesitated only a second, recalled that Garry was between the Chrysler and the outside world, then stepped out into the clearing. He heard the convertible grind into reverse, cut into low and then a dwindling second. He shrugged and moved across to the rocks and around them, swiftly and watchfully. Nothing moved. Somewhere a goat bleated, and another answered.

Then there was a wide cave-mouth.

"Percival?"

No answer, except that repetitive, high-pitched cry.

Guinn ducked into the cave and sprang to one side, feeling for that silhouetted second like a towed artillery target. A sixth sense told him there was nothing human inside. He shut his eyes tight as if to squeeze the residual sunlight out of them like some dazzling juice.

At last he could see. Book rack. A hard mattress on the scrupulously leveled and swept clay floor. Goatskins. And back in the corner, something small and white that wept and wept.

He crossed, knelt beside it. It was a newborn goat kid, a day or so old, its wobbly and beseeching head stretched toward the light.

He patted its neck and it slapped his wrist with a tongue as rough as a finishing rasp. Then he flicked his gaze over the cave again. He ran his hand over the books, glanced at their titles. Krishnamurti, Malory, Tennyson, Gibrahn, Swedenborg. White's *The Sword in the Stone*, C.S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*. Theosophy, anthropology, Ancient British Landmarks.

"Busy boy," he muttered. He turned to the mattress, touched it.

It was wet.

He could detect, as he bent over it, the acrid not unpleasant odor of fresh clean perspiration. He threw off the shaggy goatskin. Under it the mattress was sopping. But this wasn't perspiration.

It was blood.

"Ei-ee..." mourned the kid.

"Hold tight, baby," he soothed. He knelt and scrutinized the floor carefully in the band of sunlight which streamed in through the cave-mouth.

"Um-hm!" Blood again; a spot, a starred droplet, a smear. Once he had seen them it was easy enough to follow them outside ("I'll be back, baby," he told the kid), across the clearing, through a band of woodland (where, on a flat rock, there was a full scarlet handprint) and into the meadow behind the outcropping.

The goats were there, massed together like a bed of flowers, their heads all turned toward him, their eyes like shining seeds. He stopped, and here a head fell, and there, and one by one they began to graze absently. But none of them wandered far from the still figure on the grass.

He went to it and the goats fell back before him, warily and attentive.

Percival lay face downward on the grass. Guinn knew it was Percival because of the single length of white linen wrapped around his waist, and because of the tumbled gray shoulder-length hair. The hair had blood on it.

He turned the body over, and Percival moaned. He wasn't dead, and that, under the circumstances, was a pity.

Guinn took out his carefully folded display handkerchief, shook it open, and wiped out the blood-filled eyes. "It's Hadley Guinn," he said softly. "You'll be all right now."

"Mo," whispered Percival. No one could have made an 'n' sound from a mouth and tongue in that condition.

"Who did it?"

Percival breathed deeply, twice, and his eyes began to glaze. Guinn shook him, almost roughly. "You've got to tell me who did this to you." He turned the handkerchief, dabbed very gently at the tattered mouth.

Slowly the eyes regained some life. "Gwim?"

"Guinn, yes; Hadley Guinn. I'll help you, Percival. Who did this to you?"

"Gwim...goo' boy, Gwim." He coughed. Guinn caught the blood. "Who...fent...oo?"

Guinn closed his eyes and ran over forty possibilities. Then, "Who sent me? Never mind that, Percival, man. Tell me, you've got to tell me—"

Percival tossed his head impatiently. "Who? Who?"

"All right. It was a dame called Morgan."

The painful distortion of the wrecked mouth might have been a smile. Percival nodded. "Gh-h-issen..."

Guinn translated this as listen..."I'm listening, Percival," he said softly.

Percival's gnarled hand came up, pointed. The sharp old index ringer dug into his knee to punctuate the crippled, halting speech. "...Hynd guh ghuid umgh-ozhiush..."

Watching those tortured eyes, Guinn felt grief and panic mount. He tried. He tried desperately hard. "Wait: you say hy...hie...fi...find...guh...duh...the? The. Find the. Find the what, Percival?"

"Ghuid...Dhuid..."

"Doo-id? D...Druid?" Is it Druid, Percival?"

Percival nodded weakly, rapidly. His hand patted Guinn's knee as if in vast approval. "Urn...amghozhiush."

"Amgh...Amgrozihi-ess..."

Percival spread his hand in a helpless gesture. Guinn said, "Was that close? Is that almost it, Percival? Amghrozhiess? "

Percival nodded weakly. Guinn could all but see his soul leaving his body. "Who did it? Who, Percival—who?"

"M-m-m..."

"Please, please...try."

"Mugh-gug."

"Mur...murdered. Murdered. Yes, Percival—who did it?"

"M-m-m..."

Guinn put the great head down softly and stood up. He hurt. He hurt away down inside where his roiling anger lived—way under anything he could control.

He hurt enough to measure his wonderment when as a kid with a dog he had run into Percival and his goats; when he used to sit in the cave and hear that great rolling voice tell tales of ancient times, and the gods men worshipped when the world was younger, when faith had the place that knowledge has now. There were great tales of the future, too, when the reverence now given knowledge will be replaced

by understanding.

He hurt enough to measure his delight when Percival would gravely give him his choice of goat's milk or turnip juice to drink, and when the hermit gave him a great white ram's skin for his own. (It lay over the foot of his bed to this day.)

He hurt enough to measure his shame when as an enlightened teenager he had been part of a gang that went up to jeer and throw mud at the "nekkid looney." (For Percival lived naked in the warm weather and in goat-skins in the cold, always courteously donning his strip of linen when anyone came by.) They'd taken pictures and had themselves a hell of a laugh over it; and Guinn couldn't live with it and went up to apologize, and the hermit greeted him as a friend.

Percival was part of the mountain—part of the world. He was part of a very real world of rocks and flowers, wind and winter and eternal wildness—a world on which chrome and neon and nuclear energy and power politics grew like acne on a great calm face. He had never done harm to a living soul. He had never sought a human being out nor turned one away. He was on the mountain when Guinn was born and he should have been there when Guinn died, because he was part of the eternity that every man should have, somewhere, to turn to when he needs it.

Something died and was born in Guinn as he stood looking down at the great torn face. "Take care of him," he said to the goats. "I'll send somebody up..."

From the cave the kid cried and cried.

"Oh, yes, baby. You've got it just right."

He scooped up a startled nanny and headed for the cave. As he reached the entrance he heard a shot from the woods.

"Sorry, lady," he said. He flung the nanny through the cave-mouth with one fluid sweep of his two arms, hoping against hope that she and the kid would get together, and sprinted for his car.

As he passed the place where the Chrysler had been parked there was another shot, and the moan of the Town-and-Country's motor. He pounded up to the station wagon just in time to see the convertible break through the underbrush and disappear into the meadow.

Lynn was gone. Garry lay beside the car. There was a hole in the

side of his head and another at the back, and he was very bloody.

Guinn was around at all largely because he had the knack of selecting priorities among simultaneous emergencies, and because, having been born with the knack, he'd spent most of his life developing it.

When he knelt beside Garry's body he knew he had feelings about it, but he filed them away for later. The priority he noticed immediately was a smell and a sound; a steady trickle of liquid on dead leaves, and the acrid fumes of gasoline.

He dropped to his belly and looked under the car. A stream of gas the size of a pencil lead was flowing out of the tank. He pulled himself up by a doorhandle, opening the door as he moved, scooped up the rear seat and got a folding bucket from under it, and ran around to shove it under the tank. He felt the hole, a jagged oval rip cut by a .32 or something larger.

"Don't go away," he said to Garry.

He opened the right rear door, pulled at the scarred upholstery. It came off its snap-fasteners with a sound like teeth going into peanut brittle. In the shallow space between upholstery and the outer panel were row on row of parts, neatly clipped with spring clamps. There were spark plugs, three spare distributor caps, ignition wire and a number of other things that it's better to have and not need than need and not have.

Guinn's hands were a blur. He found what he was looking for: spider-expansion bolts and washers, and a screwdriver. He dove under the car, slipped the bolt through the washer and a gasket, and forced the bolt into the hole in the tank. He spun it with the screwdriver with a palm-on-palm technique he had learned in his wartime stretch in an aircraft factory, until the spider inside spread and the washer seated tightly over the hole. The he wrenched off the tank cap and slopped in the fuel which had been caught in the bucket.

The whole operation had taken somewhat over ninety seconds.

Guinn hurled the bucket, screwdriver and upholstered panel into the back of the station wagon. He lifted Garry swiftly and gently and

spread him out on the seat behind the driver's. There were cargo straps. He whipped one around Garry's chest, one around his thighs, and cinched them down. He took one precious moment to touch the youth's head with big, sensitive fingers, feeling carefully between the two holes. He pursed his lips worriedly, slid under the wheel and kicked the motor over. A patient rear fender took yet another wound-stripe as he slithered the car around, caromed off a tree, and headed out. He leaned forward, his hands placed lightly at "ten and two" like a racing driver's. He let the wheel shimmy through his fingers, and he drove.

Two shots. Garry got one. The gas tank got the other. The man who had cut up Percival's face had Lynn. Hadley Guinn was out to get that man.

On the third hairpin turn he craned over the edge as his wheels kicked stones out into space. Down below him he saw a dust cloud. He let his foot give four more ounces to the accelerator.

On the fourth turn he actually saw the convertible taking the last straightaway into the Spur road. Guinn groaned. He had two more hairpins to negotiate.

Or had he? The road zig-zagged down the mountain face, but that didn't necessarily mean he had to...

This far down the hill, the grade flattened out. From this stretch there was about a four-to-one slope to the road below. From that road the grade was a mere thirty degrees or so.

"So what the hell," he growled, and pulled on the wheel.

For an endless second he had strictly a bird's-eye view all across the windshield. Then the front end came swooping downward. There was a nasty crunch as the road shoulder ground into the muffler pipe under the car's center of gravity, and then he was off the road, headed down the slope.

There wasn't time to think. There was just time to fight. He locked the brakes when the machine would slide straight, let it roll when it wanted to turn. He diddled the brakes and outguessed the wheel. A small avalanche accompanied him, and a rising cloud of dust joined

hands with the growing dusk to make seeing tough.

Then the front wheels hit the shallow ditch of the next level of the switchback road. There was a harrowing snap as the bumper bulldozed into the ditch and broke off, and then the car was slanting across the road and down again off the other side. The underside took another blow, though not as severe this time, as the car levered over the edge. And once more the nightmare of rolling too fast and not sliding straight enough.

There was no appreciable ditch at the bottom, and it was a blacktop road. Guinn hauled the wheel over and the rubber screamed as he gunned down the Spur road. Looking across country he could see the convertible streaking along the township highway that would take it across the river and into the city.

Guinn bore down to the floor, and the station wagon laid its ears back and went. With it, it carried an unholy din of scraping metal which suddenly ceased as the muffler and exhaust stack tore loose and skittered into the ditch. The car bellowed with an open throat. Guinn nodded grimly. Made to order; he could crowd six or seven miles more per hour out of the old dog without that manifold back pressure. He took the turn into the township road altogether too fast, and had the rear end into and out of the ditch on the far side of the turn. And then he was on the straightaway, and with the convertible a distant beetle ahead of him. He glanced back at the mountain, grinned tightly as he saw the long scar of his tracks straight down its naked face. He'd gotten a half-mile jump on the Chrysler by short-circuiting those two hairpins.

He checked ahead for traffic and then twisted to look back at Garry. The youth lay limp and pale in his straps. The bleeding seemed to have stopped for the time being. Guinn prayed that his probing fingers had been right.

Glancing ahead again, he felt a leap of joy as he saw that he was gaining on the convertible. Traffic was light, happily, and there was nothing between him and the other car. He pulled out the choke lever a tiny fraction and did his best to put his foot through the floorboards. He took his right hand off the wheel, fingered his gun out of its holster and wedged it between his right buttock and the seat.

Suddenly he stiffened, peered. The convertible was just about to gain the bridge, which carried the road on its own level as steep banks fell to the water below. And at the other end of the bridge, coming

toward them, was the great hulking mass of a lowboy trailer carrying a fifty-ton power shovel. The bridge was wide enough for two lanes of ordinary traffic, but getting the Chrysler past it was going to be a trick.

He saw a single flicker of the convertible's brake lights, and then its driver apparently decided to bull through. Guinn saw the lowboy tractor lumbering as far over to his side of the bridge as it could, and the trailer reluctantly following. The swelling sides of the shovel's cab bulged far over the center-line of the roadway.

The brake lights flared again. The convertible would clear the tractor and probably the side of the shovel, but the rear end of the trailer was still slightly angled across the road.

The convertible braked, and braked again, and each time a huge bite was taken out of the distance between Guinn and his quarry. He was less than two hundred feet behind when it happened. The Chrysler found its opening and hurtled through. It must have nipped the back corner of the lowboy the lightest of touches, and it was all but scraping the guard rail on the right. In that split second the right-hand door of the Chrysler opened. It was rear-hinged door; the wind flipped it wide. Its edge struck the guard rail and broke it off—and a slim figure in purple rose in the air and arched over the rail.

“Lynn!”

In the same instant he had to wrench his wheel right, then left to get through the same gap, a blessed inch or two wider now as the trailer straightened out on its side of the roadway. It had all happened so fast that the lowboy crew probably saw none of it, except two cars driving too damn fast.

Now Guinn really had a priority to choose.

He could go after his man and run him to earth—with the idea that Lynn might be hurt—drowned or crushed—in that wild leap over the rail. Or he could swing right at the end of the bridge, where an underpass connected with the River Road, and try to save her—knowing that the Chrysler would be miles away.

He peered at the license plate and knew he wouldn't forget it. He realized, too, that with Lynn out of the Chrysler, half his reason for catching it was gone. Of course, catching Percival's murderer was reason enough, but—

He cursed, and as he swept off the end of the bridge, pulled right. The convertible arrowed ahead.

Down under the first pier of the bridge, Guinn pulled up. He glanced worriedly at Garry. "You'll just have to wait, son," he murmured. He slipped his gun back in its holster and ran down to the water's edge. His first searching look was upward, at the roadway above. There was no sign of a body on the rail or on the second pier, seventy-five feet or so out in the river. She'd fallen clear, then. And on the upstream side. And then he saw her—the merest glimpse of water-darkened copper blonde hair, the flash of an arm against the brown stone of the pier.

He kicked off his shoes, shoved his gun in one and his wallet in the other, ran down a flight of stone boat-landing steps and plunged into the river.

He swam strongly out to the pier, wondering how he could have been so stupid as to have left his jacket on, figuring what the hell, it was a tropical and not very unwieldy; no point wasting it now. He gained the pier almost under the bridge, for the current ran fairly strongly here. He pulled himself up on its platform-like surface, which was only a foot or so above water level, and walked squishily to the upstream end.

She was there, clinging weakly to the stone, breathing in deep gasps. When she saw him she yelped. "Oh!" She took in some water, coughed violently. He knelt and grasped her wrist.

The coughing subsided. "Mr. Guinn..." She pushed her hair back. One side of her face and one shoulder were scarlet. "I didn't...see you come up. I was...just getting my wind back...before I...tried to make...the bank."

"Are you all right?"

"Oh, sure, except I...hit awful hard...I'm—Mr. Guinn, I'm mother naked!"

"That was a smart move."

"It wasn't a move! Strapless dress and no bra and...when I hit I

just skinned right out of it! Shoes and all...Even my...Oh, this is awful!"

"I've got news for you," said Guinn, his eyes twinkling. "I've seen the like before."

"I'm terribly sorry about it," she said surprisingly. "But...I got away from him, didn't I?"

"That you did. Don't talk now. Get your wind back and I'll give you a tow in. We've got to get to a hospital, but quick."

"Hospital? I'm—"

"Not you. Garry."

"He's—he's dead!"

"Not him. The slug slipped in under his temple and skinned around his big thick skull and came out over his ear, near the back. Concussion, maybe, but I don't think there's a fracture."

"Oh, come on." She turned immediately shoreward with long competent strokes.

Guinn let her get out into the stream and then dove after her, coming up a little ahead. He swam with a side-stroke, watching her. She suddenly coughed again.

"Thought it was too soon," he said. "Float."

"Oh, I'm all—"

"Float," he said. Submissively, she did. He got a hand under her chin and towed her, his long legs supplying a powerful scissor kick, his free hand gathering armloads of distance. Lynn lay back, completely relaxed, filling her lungs gratefully. Again the current carried them downstream a little way and they had to work their way up the stone embankment to the landing.

"Please go ahead," she said. "I'm not prissy, but—"

"Don't fret," he said kindly. He scrambled up the steps and went

to where he had left his shoes. Lynn hesitated, then ran up the steps and started toward the car, which was parked out of sight of the riverside roadway under the bridge. She was perhaps halfway there when there was a flash and a roar from the road. A heavy calibre slug nicked a small sapling at Lynn's elbow. She squeaked.

"This way," snapped Guinn. "Jump!"

She ran to him; he motioned her past so that the first bridge pier was between her and the source of the shots. Guinn dropped back to the stone steps, backed down them until he had cover.

It was growing dark as reluctantly as any early summer night will. Guinn's eyes passed the car parked on the other side of the River Road twice before he noticed it looming in the shadow of a dogwood tree.

It was the Chrysler.

He took careful aim and snapped two shots at it. There was a distinctly audible gasp, then a moan. Guinn sprinted toward it. A bullet struck the ground at his feet and another tugged at his sleeve. He fired and hit the dirt. Before he could so much as raise his head the starter whinnied, the motor caught, and the car moved off. It turned and sped up the ramp to the bridge level. Guinn fired once more, stood fuming for a moment, and then went back to the girl. She was flattened against the river side of the pier.

"It's okay now," he said. He turned and went to the station wagon. She followed. "Was that my ardent swain?" she asked in a shaken voice.

He got in the car and opened the other door for her. "It was." He took off his jacket, wrung it out over the ground, shook it, and handed it across to her. She put it over her shoulders and climbed in. "He must have had an attack of second thought. Wondered if you had killed yourself or not. Came back to see. You showed up nicely against the dark river. He couldn't see the station wagon, and didn't notice me in this brown suit. It must have been a big surprise to him to get lead thrown back at him. Who is he, anyway?"

"I don't know him, really. His name's Mordi. He came into the—"

“Morty?”

“Mordi. He came into the hash house a few times. Dark. Dresses well. Very quiet.” She shuddered. “I’ll look out for those quiet ones after this. Steel traps...dynamite sticks...they’re nice and quiet, un-til.”

He started the motor, backed, turned, and got onto the River Road. She said suddenly, “Mr. Guinn...”

“Mmm?”

She hesitated. Then, “Mind if I take this off again? You’ll think I’m terrible, but it’s so clammy. And it’s warm this evening and somehow it doesn’t seem to matter. Though I don’t know how I’ll ever get out of the car in town.”

“Go ahead,” said Guinn. “It’s getting dark. The passing parade will think you’re still in that strapless job. You’re right—it matters as much as or as little as you let it. When we get to the hospital I’ll see if there isn’t a nurse’s uniform I can swipe for you.”

She peeled off the jacket and draped it over the seat between them. She crossed her arms and rubbed her shoulders for a moment, then sat demurely with her hands on her lap.

He said, “You took a hell of a chance with that high-dive.”

“Not so much,” she said. “I used to swim there a lot. The channel’s real deep between the bank and that second pier, and I knew that. I noticed the way that car door opened when I was with him this afternoon. I knew it would slam wide open if I just opened it a little and I was waiting my chance. When he had to swing so near the rail to pass that trailer—that was it. I got my feet under me and dove right off the seat. I used to go off there all the time. It’s forty-two feet,” she added.

“At about forty-two miles an hour, just then,” he said: “Lucky you didn’t break your back.”

“Well, I didn’t.”

He glanced at her admiringly. “Do you have to work at that hash-

house?"

"It's a job."

"You've got a better one if you want it."

"With you? Do you mean it?"

"Yup."

"Oh, I'd love it. I'd just love it."

A conquest, thought Guinn.

She said, "I could maybe see him every day."

"See who?"

"Garry."

Not my conquest, he thought, and allowed himself one of his rare grins. "He's a good kid."

"He's the bravest man I've ever known! Why, when that man came up out of the woods like that..."

"Tell me about it."

"I was a little afraid of him at first, Garry I mean," she said. "The way he was looking at me. Then he started to talk. I never heard anybody talk the way he does. Not as if I was a girl. Just as if I was... well, people. About the car and you and jet aircraft and banana cream pie and the National League. It was..." She paused. "Anyway, we heard the other car start. Garry put a hand on my arm and said not to worry. That was all, just 'Don't worry.' I wish I could tell you how—safe—it made me feel.

"The car came up, and sure enough it was him—Mordi, the man I'd been riding with before I met you. He looked out at us and then stopped his car. He leaned out for a long time and looked at me and at Garry and the station wagon, and then he got out and came up to us. I never saw such cold eyes on a human being in my life, and they shouldn't be, they're not the right color to be so cold.

"Garry got out and they stood looking at each other. Finally Mordi said, 'Nobody cuts in on me, cottonhead.'

“Garry said, ‘Beat it, cottonmouth. Nothing around here belongs to you.’

“So the man said to me, ‘He’s so wrong, ain’t he, sugar?’

“And I said, ‘He’s so right.’

“He came up close, then, and told me I was going back with him. I just shook my head. Then Garry said, ‘That’ll do for now, tailor-dummy. Goodbye again.’ And he reached inside his jacket. When he did that, Mordi pulled out a gun and shot him in the head.”

Guinn’s eyes seemed to get smaller. “Garry never carries a gun,” he said. “I’ll have to tell him some things about raising on a three-card straight.”

“He’s too honest to get away with a bluff,” said Lynn.

“Oh,” said Guinn. The smile appeared again.

Lynn said, “He reached in and got my wrist. I didn’t know he was going to pull so hard, so suddenly. He hauled me out and I was flat on my face before I knew what was happening. Then he hit me.” She put her hand behind her neck, stroked. “I guess I went out, and I didn’t come to all at once, either. Everything was sort of dreamy for the longest time.”

“I know that punch,” said Guinn.

“I was in his car,” she continued. “He wasn’t. I heard another shot. I remember thinking he must have gone back to finish Garry. Or maybe you.”

“Shot a hole in my gas tank,” said Guinn.

“Oh. Well, before I was completely out of it, we were charging down the hill. He drove very fast. He laughed at me. He’s crazy... what’d he want to kill a man over me for?”

“I don’t want to take a compliment away from a lady,” said Guinn, “but it wasn’t over you. He killed somebody up there, and we were the only ones who’d seen him around. He knew what he was doing. That’s why he came back just now to make sure you were out of the running.

He seems to've missed me altogether. I guess while I was catfooting over toward the rocks on one side, he was sneaking back on the other.

She shuddered. "He laughed at me," she said. "He-he touched me, too."

"I'll speak to him about that sometime soon," said Guinn.

The county hospital was just outside the city limits, across the highway from forest land. It was quite dark when they reached it. Guinn pulled up across the road from the big brick pylons which flanked the entrance to the hospital drive.

"Out," he said.

She looked at him, wide-eyed. "What?"

He chuckled. "Cheer up. I'm not pulling a Mordi on you. Has it occurred to you that I've got to drive up to the emergency ward, floodlights and all, and that a couple of interns will be out to tote Garry in? Of course, I could explain that I'm helping you home from a floating crap game where you lost your shirt..."

She opened the door. "Hurry back," she said.

He watched her cross the road shoulder and enter the woods. He shrugged into his damp jacket. It was clammy, but would cover his holster. Then he pulled into the drive. He turned at the parking court, wondering about the mental processes of landscapers who built graceful curves into a road which so often would have life or death at the end of it, and swung in under the brightly-lit port-cochere.

A grizzled guard hobbled over to him, peered. "Had Guinn! Back again?"

"With a customer. Get a couple of butchers out here with a stretcher, will you, Jerry?"

He followed the old man in and went over to the registration window. "Hello, Cheryl."

A blonde woman with a face like the most comfortable of sofa pillows looked up through the glass. When she saw him she smiled. It

was like the kind of lamplight that goes with that kind of pillow.
“Hadley!”

“I brought Garry in,” he said bluntly. “Someone creased his head.”

She rose. “Is he—”

“Doesn’t look too bad. But I’d like to know right away. I’m on a case. Will you take care of the gunshot report for me?”

“Oh, yes.” She got out the form, slid it through to him.

He signed it on the bottom line. “One more thing. I know you people do the best you can, but I’d like you to think up something even better for Garry. Whatever he needs, hear? I mean anything.”

He got his wallet out and thumbed through its inside compartment. An expression of almost stupid astonishment slackened his features.

Cheryl said, “What is it, Hadley? You been robbed?”

“No...” His eyes came back to earth. “No, Cheryl, I should say not.” He pulled bills out of the wallet.

C-notes. Five of them.

He closed his eyes. There was that center drawer of his desk. In it, the telephone company’s envelope. In the envelope, three of the C-notes the Morgan chick had given him. Five minus three left two. There ought to be two hundred in the wallet. There were five.

“What is it, Hadley?”

He looked at her. “Just trying to figure out whether or not I’d tipped a waiter. Here.” He slid two of the bills through the hole. They settled to her desk like a couple of pigeons on a roof. That’s extra, over the bill. I got more.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I do have to. I just want to know he’s a bit more than all right. Uh...you don’t have to talk to him about it.”

She smiled. "The way you treat him, he thinks you hate him." She picked up the money.

"So he keeps on trying hard to make me happy. If he thought I was happy, why should he bother?"

"You're a softy, Hadley Guinn."

"You're a pretty hard character yourself." He winked at her. "Oh. Cheryl—"

"Yes, Had."

"Can you dredge me up a nurse's uniform? Not the starched job—one of those lab wraparounds."

"What on earth for?"

"My Sunday school's putting on a pageant," he explained. "I'm to be Florence Nightingale."

"Idiot. What size?"

"About Miss Roark and a half." Miss Roark was the trim one in the super's office.

"Sure, Hadley." She went through a door at the back of the office. Guinn turned. They were bringing Garry in. He looked very white. Guinn followed the interns into the receiving ward. A tired man with wakeful eyes waved the interns toward an examining table. "Hello, Jim."

The doctor thumped his shoulder. "Good to see you. That's your Number One boy, isn't it? Garry what's-his-name?"

"Yeah. Can you give me a verdict quickly. I got to go."

"What happened to him?"

The doctor bent over Garry's head while Guinn told him. Then he rolled Garry's lids back, peered at the eyes. He put on his stethoscope and prodded around with it.

“He might need a transfusion. Concussion possibly. Shock certainly. He might have trouble with the hearing on that side for a while. He’s a lucky boy.”

“How long will the transfusion take me?”

“No time at all. Not for you, Guinn. He’s Type B, you’re A. Don’t worry about it. We have lots in the bank. You won’t do.”

“You can tell by my astral vibrations?”

The doctor laughed. “I can tell by memory. The last time you two gave blood for the Red Cross he asked me what your blood type was, and swore a blue streak when he found out his was different. He thought he might be useful to you some time.”

“Hell.” Guinn looked at the still face. “Take care of him, Jim.”

“Sure.” He bent over the patient again. Guinn read that one casual syllable all the way through, and in it found what sort of care Garry was going to get. He said, “Thanks, Jim,” and went out.

Cheryl was waiting for him with a neatly folded paper package. “Hadley...”

“Oh, thanks, Cheryl. The uniform.” He took it.

She said, “I think I ought to tell you. There was someone here today boning through the hospital records. Yours especially.”

“Looking for what? That bone operation?”

She shook her head. “That’s in the journals—how they picked a .44 slug piece by piece out of your bone marrow. No, Hadley, the birth records.”

His face went absolutely expressionless. “Who was it?”

“A girl. A really beautiful girl.”

“Probably from a matrimonial agency trying to answer some maiden’s prayer. What kind of authority did she have?” Cheryl recoiled at the way the last words grated out. Guinn touched her shoulder. “Sorry. Well?”

“She had identification from the State Census. Strictly kosher. I just thought you ought to know.” Her eyes were very soft. “Hadley, it

makes more difference than it should to you. Not the investigator. You know.”

“My birth records. Yes, I know. Maybe it does. It makes a difference to any of us.” He looked down at the package, crinkled the paper. “Hey, I got to get out of here. Thanks for everything, Cheryl.”

“For nothing, honey. Hadley, I won’t ask you about your business, but if you’ve got to go near any more gun fights, let’s not have any more hospital cases on your side. Hm?”

He went to the door, waved. “I’ll be good.” She cared. She gave a damn. It’s fine to know somebody gives a damn. “By the way, what was the name of the nosy chick?”

Cheryl said, “Morgan.”

Hadley steered through the pylon-guarded entrance, wheeled across the highway, and stopped. He waited.

Nothing happened.

He slid across the seat and peered into the black wall of the forest. Nothing.

He got back behind the wheel. He lit a cigarette. That took a little time. He opened the package, wadded up the paper and tossed it back over the seat, unfolded the crisp white dress and draped it over the seat next to him. That took some time too.

She didn’t come.

He uttered a sudden snort of disgust. Of course! The lights. He shifted, angled the car close in to the ditch, and shut off the lights and motor.

It was very quiet out there. The forest slept, but for all its sleep it was alive with little creaks and whisperings. He climbed out, and something made him close the door very quietly.

There was no wind. Somewhere a train uttered a two-toned cry, and the mountains threw it back like a wailing wall. The hospital was a gold-checkered garment tossed carelessly on a hassock, with the

checks showing randomly back, up, across. The emergency entrance blazed defiantly at the patient blackness, and from the whole structure came a hum of power; machines turning, water running, life flowing, coming in, going out.

The woods had their low, live sound, too, but it was at odds with the hospital and everything it represented. The forest had its light, too.

It took Guinn a while to see the light, because his pupils were still tensed from the brilliance of the receiving ward. It was not firelight, and it wasn't a flashlight. It looked like the third or fourth reflection of a welder's arc, but without an arc's flicker. Nor was it steady, like a magnesium flare; it waxed and waned irregularly, like the sound of a crowd at a prize fight. And it was very, very dim.

Guinn hesitated. Had Lynn seen the light? Probably. She had been very alone and very watchful, crouching naked in the dark. Had she then gone to investigate? It could be. She had more guts than most regiments. If he went in there, he might miss her. If she got to the car and he wasn't there, would she wait for him?

What else? He reached in the window, got his keys out of the ignition and the dress from the front seat. His clothes were still damp, but the night was very warm. He folded the dress and tucked it inside his jacket, on the right side. Then he headed for the brush.

The thicket just over the ditch was like an ancient boxwood, tangled and impenetrable. He cast to the right until he found what looked like an opening. He had to fight the branches, and he did so quietly. He got through, and found himself in a patch of wood that was very like virgin forest—a solid roof overhead and very little underbrush. He could see the light much better now, waxing and waning through the stark trunks. The going was good, and the possibility of Lynn's being back here made a lot more sense. The first thing she would have done would be to get through the hedge; after that, the light must have beckoned her strongly.

He forged ahead, unconsciously taking on the sliding stride of a natural woodsman, finding and avoiding projecting roots and rocks. His eyes were wide; he felt that an infrared picture would show his pupils almost as big as his irises. Bigger, maybe. His lips twitched at the fantastic thought, and he switched it out of his mind.

He began to hear the voice.

There is a passage in Ravel's *Bolero* where the composer, either through a thorough scientific knowledge of vibratory physics or instinctively, under the guidance of his trained ears, gives the great droning solo theme to the clarinet, and adds a piccolo part. That piccolo, on paper, is sheer nonsense. It plays the same theme at the same intervals, but in a different and totally unrelated key. It makes almost as little sense on the piano. Orchestrated, it creates one of the most astonishing effects known to music. Its compulsion, as it restates the already hypnotic theme, is indescribable—and largely a function of the psychological susceptibilities of the listener. In acoustical terms, what is happening is that the clarinet, more than most instruments, projects harmonics with its basic tone. Ravel's amazing treatment uses a piccolo, which is very stingy with its overtones, to reinforce the usually inaudible fifth harmonic of the clarinet. The effect is that of a new voice, never heard before, speaking with the familiar tones of a friend.

This little-known piece of musicology flashed through Guinn's mind as he heard the voice. The analogy was an exact one, for that was precisely what was happening, except that the voice which stated the basic tone was something more than human. It was certainly a single voice, but it had the quality of a great many ranges, from the highest tenor to the most shattering basso profundo, all speaking in unison. The second voice, the one pitched in a disharmony that served to reinforce a single one of the qualities of the main voice—that second one was familiar. In the rare moments that his acute ear could tune it away from its accompanying diapason, Guinn knew that he had heard those full, high, sweet tones before.

Something began to bother him. He had moved forward a hundred feet before he realized what it was. His legs; the voice; the light—they were meshing too closely in their movements. Furiously, he identified it; he was walking in time to a beat which was created by the sound and the changing light. Not that they changed with any predictable regularity. Far from it. But as if they were part of some incredibly complex, rigidly fixed ritual, they touched and fled from and syncopated a basic beat—a beat faster than a quiet heart, forcefully held slower than a frightened and guarded one. He broke stride, fiercely defending his independence.

The light seemed to have its source in a circular area of the forest

floor, and the voice was born somewhere in the light. The ground rose gently as he walked; suddenly, then, he saw it all.

There was a dip in the forest, a saucer-like depression thirty yards or so across. As he reached its lip, the entire scene below was revealed to him, suddenly, completely, as if a great curtain had parted.

A tremendous oak stood in the center of the depression. Its mighty spread had waned off anything but moss that had tried to grow around it, so that there was a smooth clearing around it. Standing at its base was the biggest man Guinn had ever seen.

He was standing in the clearing, his face upturned, his arms out toward the oak. He looked like an old oak himself. His skin was dark brown, his face gnarled, his arms knotted and powerful. They stretched out like winter limbs from the dazzlingly white sleeveless robe which covered him from his shoulders to his bare feet. The light-source was his robe, and his lips were the source of the great voice.

Behind him knelt Lynn, sitting on her heels, with her back arched and her hands on the ground behind her. Her head was up, her tangled, fine hair thrown back. Her teeth shone and her eyes blazed. Her lips moved. The second, harmonic voice was hers, in its highest register. It was modulated exactly to his magnificent chanting; she spoke so perfectly in concert with him that they might both have been controlled by the same mind, like two pipes of an organ under the knowing hand of a master.

The chant at first seemed wordless. Guinn slowly realized it was not. It was a series of syllables, most of them long drawn vowel sounds without diphthongs, like those in an Irish brogue. They were separated by unearthly consonants, staccato and clean. The language was like nothing he had ever heard, but it was good to listen to.

He stood there for uncounted moments, forgetting to breathe, completely entranced. There was an intensity to the light which changed with the quality of the sounds, and there was a quality to the light which changed with the sounds' pitch. It was a thing which had to be experienced to be understood, and once that understanding occurred, it was inexpressible.

The huge dark man dropped one of his massive hands to the wide

white belt that was clasped around his waist. From it he drew a long, slightly curved dagger that gleamed like gold. He held it point upward in both hands. Guinn followed his gaze, and saw that it was pointed at a cluster of dark green leaves and white berries on the tree-trunk. The dagger began to move upward toward it.

This, later, was the most inexplicable thing of all to Guinn. For at no time did the man change his position. He did not lose his grasp on the knife; he kept both hands on its hilt. The tree did not move. Yet—

The knife went out and up, slowly and steadily. It reached the trunk of the oak, turned and sliced off the clump of glossy green. The man, standing twenty feet away from the tree, had bridged the gap between him and a growth twelve feet from the ground. His arms had not stretched; in no way did he seem out of proportion. In fact, the movement seemed utterly right. Guinn felt that he had seen a movement in a new direction, and that he could not be surprised. He seemed to have known of that direction for a long time but never had bothered to look that way before.

The plant fell. One of the great brown hands was there before it, caught it, laid it on the moss before the knotted feet.

Then the man turned, stood facing outward, away from the tree. Lynn's body turned as he turned, and now she knelt with her back toward him, her arms down, her long slim hands palm-upward on the ground.

Guinn's eyes flicked to the hand holding the knife, to the smooth white back bowed before him. He reached into his left armpit and eased the .32 out.

Shockingly, the chant stopped. The silence was deafening, unbearable. The light was unchanging, muted. There was a great expectancy in the wood.

He looked around the clearing. So compelling had been the tableau by the oak that he hadn't taken in the edges of the scene at all.

The bushes around the depression looked as if they were filled with rhinestones—with emeralds, rubies—with...eyes!

And they were eyes. The low branches held silent birds, their little heads turned sidewise so that one eye could take in the scene. From a tree-fork at his shoulder hung the luxuriously dressed form of a raccoon, which stared fixedly at the big man. Guinn looked down. What he had thought was a small stump was a fox, not six feet away from him. Its black, wet nose tossed delicate spangles of light as it pressed its head down and forward toward the oak. On the ground in front of it—almost between its paws—was a chipmunk, staring brightly, and holding its deft small hands together in frozen ecstasy.

There was a deep crooning. Guinn looked back at the dark man. He had not moved, but the sound came from him. And Lynn's high, sweet supplement was there too; he could see the flexing of her ribcage as she drew breath between the mesmeric phrases.

Something moved at the lip of the depression, forty-five degrees across from Guinn's viewpoint, and directly in front of Lynn.

One...no, two big brown rabbits came toward her. They did not hop. They moved belly-down, like stalking cats. It affected Guinn almost more than anything else had. The animals were in the throes of some strange supplication, and their completely uncharacteristic gait caused a deep pain in him somewhere.

They reached the girl, and lay down, one across each of her hands. She lifted them. They drooped, motionless except for their hind legs, which were taut, stiff, quivering in rapid spasm.

Still singing, Lynn rose to her feet and brought the rabbits to the big man. Guinn realized how big he was. Lynn was a tall girl, but her head barely reached the level of the man's heart. The rabbits were large ones—eight- or nine-pound jacks; but both, lying side by side, barely covered the huge dark hand from thumb-base to fingertips.

Holding both rabbits in one hand, the man turned to face the tree again. Lynn was suddenly silent. The man shouted four crackling syllables, and with a single sweep of his golden dagger, sliced off the rabbits' heads.

The muscles of Guinn's jaw crackled audibly. He became conscious of a long-forgotten fact—that his automatic was in his right hand. He raised it, took the barrel in his left, held it while he released

the cramped right fingers and flexed them until he felt they could be trusted. Then he grasped the molded grip again, got his index finger under the guard.

The big man was moving now, holding the twitching bodies downward. Dark blood was spouting, and with it he was sprinkling the roots of the tree. As Guinn brought his gun hand up, the man disappeared around the tree.

The huge shadow of the tree moved opposite the light source, sweeping across the clearing like a monstrous hand brushing away flies. And at its touch the animals scattered like flies, an approaching, passing, receding wave of squeaks and squawks, whimpers, growls, hoots and rustlings. Behind the passing shadow the tree-limbs moved and their leaves fluttered, and the underbrush whipped and thrashed. Before it, the forest was spangled with the gleaming of their fixed eyes.

Then the big man rounded the trunk, still holding the carcasses. Their blood dripped now instead of spurting, and he held them close to the roots and moved slowly.

When his circuit was completed he stopped, dropped the rabbits, and turned toward Lynn, who stood watching him tensely, her lips parted, her head up. And Guinn brought up his gun and fired. He aimed over the man's left shoulder, purposely high.

The man's hand came up in unison with Guinn's. Just behind the crash of Guinn's gun came a distinct thunk!

And Guinn found himself gaping down at that laughing dark face—laughing so that the leaves shivered—and following the movement of the small object being tossed in the huge hand.

The giant had caught Guinn's bullet not only in his hand, but between his thumb and forefinger.

You're acting like a rube, he snarled at himself. The hand is quicker than the eye—even the private eye. He tightened his grip on himself, on his gun. "Sorry to interrupt," he said into the echoing silence that followed the giant's laughter, "But the lady was with me."

"You interrupted nothing," said the giant pleasantly. "We were quite finished."

"Who are you?" Guinn snapped.

The man looked at him thoughtfully. "You know who I am."

"I do?"

"You do. When you admit that you do, you'll seek me out. Until then..." He made a courtly gesture, a sort of casual salute. Then the light—went out.

Guinn bit his tongue and cursed. The darkness had hit his eyeballs like a physical blow, and he literally sagged under the impact. He stood in the blackness, shaking, sweating, waiting.

Gradually there was a leaf-torn sky again, the dim presence of tree trunks. Somewhere a mouse squeaked. Overhead he heard the tiny, unlubricated sound of a bat. A breath of wind passed, and the forest seemed to exhale quietly.

"Lynn..."

"Yes, I'm here."

"Is he—"

"He's gone." He heard her feet as she left the mossy carpet and crossed dead leaves. She was climbing toward him. He put out his hand. It touched her body; soft, warm, unafraid. His throat was dry and burning and his flesh was cold and clammy. He found her hand and said again, "Are you all right?"

"Oh, yes."

"Where is he?" he whispered. "He must be standing down there."

"He isn't," she said positively. "He's gone."

He peered down into the blackness, and abruptly there was a sort of flow, a warm radiation of comfort and relaxation. There was proportion and reality in the world again. "Yes," he said, surprising himself. "He's gone."

Hand in hand they followed the glow, the mechanical hum of the hospital, which was now visible. "Lynn, what happened?"

“I saw the light,” she said quietly. “I went to see. I think I was afraid at first. I thought if I knew what the light was I wouldn’t be afraid any more, so I went to look. He was...”

She fell behind as they passed between close-set trees, then caught up and took his hand again. “He was—waiting for me. It was as if I knew him, knew what to do...You saw, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Lynn, what was it for? Who is he?”

She was silent as they worked their way through the blackness. She was quiet for so long that he squeezed her hand and said, “Well?”

She said, “If you’re around somebody a whole lot—your brother or someone you go to school with or something—do you suddenly stop and say ‘What’s your name?’ It was sort of like that. No, I never saw him before. I never did those things before. But it didn’t occur to me to ask any questions.”

He said, because he wanted to know, “He didn’t touch you?”

“Oh, no!”

“I believe,” said Guinn, “that two things and two things get you four things. I believe that every effect has a cause, and every reaction is there because of some action.” He paused, and then said almost plaintively, “I’ve got to believe that, Lynn!”

She chuckled. She was certainly not laughing at him. She reached her other hand over and patted his wrist. “Hard guy,” she said.

They reached the hedge. Guinn fumbled along it for an opening. He stopped suddenly. “I plumb forgot.” He reached inside his jacket and got the nurse’s uniform, shook it out. “This won’t look like Fifth Avenue,” he said apologetically.

“What is—Oh! A dress! Thank you...” She shrugged into it, and as she buttoned the belt, she said, “I didn’t feel naked until you handed me that.”

In an obscure way, he felt like apologizing. He didn’t. He said, “I didn’t feel you were.” He turned to the hedge, added, “You suppose

I'm getting old?"

"Do you suppose I'm getting brazen?"

It was the right answer. Something was going on here—some shift in perspective, some new element in the atmosphere. "Come on."

They broke through and emerged into the highway some hundred yards below the parked station wagon. They walked silently, each deeply immersed in thought. Lynn spoke once: "Is Garry—"

"He's going to be all right."

"I knew that," she said wonderingly. "I seem to've known that all along. Remember when I got into the car, when he was lying on the seat? I didn't do anything for him. I barely even looked at him. I didn't have to; I knew he was all right."

Then they reached the car, got in. Guinn found his keys, started the car. They pulled into the highway and moved off toward the town. It wasn't easy to talk against the roar of the unmuffled exhaust, and they didn't try too hard. Lynn gave him her address, and when they reached the town he found it without trouble. He pulled up in front of it. It was frame house with a vine-covered porch and a picket fence. There was a sign on a post in the lawn that said:

ROOMS

TRANSIENT

PERMANENT.

Lynn got out. Guinn leaned across the seat and looked up at her. "I owe you an outfit."

"You do not. I owe you a whole lot more."

"A clout on the neck?"

"I got hit much harder than that," she twinkled. "Shall I come to your office tomorrow?"

"Call me," he said. Her face seemed to fall a trifle. He said, "I

meant what I said about that, Lynn. Square yourself with your boss at the cafe.”

“Thanks. Oh, thanks so much.”

“I’m ahead.” He waved his hand and started the car. He had to turn it around, and he sped past her place again she was still on the porch, tiptoe on her bare feet, waving.

Guinn parked the car in front of his building and sagged for a moment. He felt as if he had earned the luxury of letting his back bend for a few seconds. He thought.

He thought about Lynn, and about the extraordinary scene in the wood, about the man in the convertible who shot at girls and flayed off the skin on people’s faces, strip by strip. He thought back and back through his day’s work until he got to lunch time, where it started. The Morgan girl and her vagueness and her fantastic expense money. He took out his wallet.

In it were five one-hundred-dollar bills.

He sat very quietly, with his eyes closed.

She’d given him five centuries. He’d put three in the drawer before he left. At the hospital he’d found he had five left, not two. He’d given two hundred to Cheryl. Now he had five left instead of three.

He thought, there are two kinds of things going on around here. One is the kind of thing I understand, and the other is the kind of thing I don’t understand.

Is that simple enough? he asked himself.

It should be.

I understand about guys who make rough passes at girls. I understand about guys who torture people to get information from them. I even understand about girls who have guts enough to dive out of a moving car over the railing of a forty-foot cliff.

But I don’t understand about men who can coax rabbits out to

have their throats cut, and can pluck a .32 slug out of the air. I don't understand a guy who makes a chanting and somehow controls a girl's voice to synchronize with it like that. And I especially don't understand about this money.

Guinn sat up a little straighter: He knew he would be better off if he forgot the things he couldn't understand. He also knew that he couldn't. What he could do was seal them up in the back of his mind. Maybe he'd find the bridge between the known and the unknown; maybe some silly little piece of evidence would show up that would be the missing link. Until then, he wasn't going to beat his brains out.

He swung the door open, pulled out the ignition key, dropped it in his pocket and climbed out. He stretched. He felt tired. He kicked the car door closed and went into the building.

Old George, the night elevator man, was asleep on a battered rung chair, his Adam's apple still pretending it was a chin, and chewing. Guinn walked up the two flights. He was glad to be back. He thumbed out his door key and let himself into the dark waiting room, crossed to the inner office, turned on the light.

"Hello," somebody said gravely.

He stood dangling his key stupidly. He was stiff with shock. Shock was a vise on his abdomen, a clamp on his heart, a quick-freeze on his lungs. He didn't show it.

"Please shut it. There's a draft," said the girl called Morgan.

Guinn tossed the key, caught it, put it away. He crossed the office and got behind the desk and sat down. He glowered at her. She sat where she had been before. Her legs were crossed and her hair gleamed and she still had the most exquisite mouth he had ever seen. Her skin was still young and her eyes ancient. Instead of the caped dress, she now wore a lime-colored number with a demure little white collar buttoned under her chin. There was another button an inch above her waistline. Between the two buttons the material separated, no wider than a finger, all the way down. This was a garment with something to say, and it made its points.

"I'd like a progress report," she said.

He snorted and reached for the phone, dialed. While he waited for the connection, he glared at her. If she had grinned at him he would have thrown the phone at her. She didn't grin. She watched him levelly, and waited.

"Sam," Guinn said into the phone. "Yeah, I know it's late. Look, I want you climb into your jalopy and take a trip. No—not tomorrow; now! Don't say that, chum. You know I wouldn't call you if it wasn't important. Okay, then...That's better.

"I want you to get up to Percival's cave. Yeah. No, he won't. Somebody knocked him off today. Damn you, would I kid about a thing like that? All right then. Sorry, I knew him a long time. Anyway, the wagon's come and gone by now, but his goats are still up there. I want you to round 'em up and take care of them. Yeah. And don't forget to milk the nannies. They've missed one milking already, maybe two, and that's no good. It hurts 'em.

"Right. All right, Sam. You're okay, you short-tempered old scut. Stay with 'em; I'll be up in the morning. Sam—thanks."

He put the phone down, took out his wallet, got out the five bills, dropped them on the desk, and pushed them across the desk with a pencil eraser. "Here."

She lowered her lids to look at the money. Her lashes almost touched her cheeks. When she was asleep they probably did. "What's that for?"

"It's your money. I don't want it. I don't want your case, either."

She nodded, almost placidly.

She picked up the money, opened the chartreuse and black handbag she carried, and dropped the money into it. "That's not all the money you've gotten from me, is it?"

"I gave you five."

Her gaze dropped to the desk. He cursed suddenly, viciously, ripped the drawer open and got the telephone bill. The old envelope tore in two as he pulled the banknotes out of it.

Three bank notes. C-notes.

He looked up at her, his face frozen. “The hand,” he said, “is quicker than the—” He stopped, because he remembered saying, or thinking, the same thing just recently. This afternoon, or was it—

She took the money and put it away in her purse. She asked, without smiling, without frowning either: “Why don’t you want the case?”

He said, “I wouldn’t be so foolish as to accuse you of sending me up on the Hill when you did just so old Percival would get what he got. But it figures the same way. I’ll never live so long that I’ll forget this afternoon—or the fact that you had something to do with it.”

“How do you figure that?”

He reached behind him and switched on a hot plate. He swizzled the pot that stood on it to see how much water was in it. Satisfied, he turned back to her. “You’ve been asking questions about this stone, this cup, or whatever it is. Some hood figured it was valuable, went after it. Percival got—Miss Morgan, do you know what was done to him?”

“I can imagine.”

He snorted. “The hell you can.”

She considered him in her expressionless way. “I take it you’re going to drop the whole thing, then.”

“I didn’t say that. I said I didn’t want your case. How far I chase down my own affairs is up to me.”

Her expression changed, but there was no saying exactly how. It wasn’t in the eyes, the mouth. It was, if anything, something inside. But now she looked pleased.

He was annoyed. “I gave you the money,” he said pointedly. When she simply sat, watching him, he said, “And tomorrow I change that lock.”

“Locks mean nothing to me,” she said.

“They do to me, if they’re mine. Miss Morgan, I think I’m taking up too much of your time.”

“Oh, no.” She shook her head solemnly.

He rummaged into his desk, found a jar of instant coffee and some restaurant-style containers. He spooned the powder into a container, switched off the hot plate, and poured steaming water into the coffee. He sat stirring it, looking at her. He didn’t offer her any.

From his top right-hand drawer he got a handful of pretzel sticks. Dunking one, he stuck the end into his mouth.

“This is where you came in,” he said.

She nodded.

“Damn it!” he exploded. “What are you after?”

She said, “Wouldn’t it be better with rye?”

He had the container to his lips as she spoke. His nostrils distended. There’s a distinctive odor to strong black coffee with a dollop of rye in it—and this had it.

Guinn’s first reaction was to drop it; his second to throw it. His third was to drink it. He did none of these things. He put it down with a consciously controlled rock-steadiness. He selected a pretzel-stick carefully and dunked it. It tasted of rye. He finished it slowly, wiped his hand across his mouth, and took out a cigarette. As he clawed a book of matches up from the desk, the girl raised one hand from her lap and pointed a finger at him. Something like a swift butterfly of flame whisked across from the finger to his cigarette, and was gone. He drew back violently, followed by a faint curl of tobacco smoke. He automatically dragged on the cigarette. It was lit, and the unexpected gout of smoke made him cough. He thought he smelled ozone.

“Do something else casual,” said the girl, as quietly and offensively as ever. “I can keep this sort of thing up all night.”

“Okay,” he said harshly. “What’s your story, Miss Morgan?”

“Look in your wallet.”

“I know what’s in the wallet.”

“You do?”

A dangerous light came into his eyes. Silently he took out his wallet, opened it, drew out five one-hundred dollar bills and put them and the wallet down side by side on the desk.

“Very good.” He wet his lips. I guess this means that the two yards I left at the hospital for Garry are phoney—if they’re there at all. I’m beginning to like you, Miss Morgan.”

“No,” she said quickly. “They’re real. They’re all real.”

“They come from some place.”

“They come from people who won’t miss it—or who shouldn’t have it.”

“How?”

“You wouldn’t understand.” There was no effrontery in her voice; she was stating a flat fact.

“I’m a pretty understanding guy,” he said.

She rose and came close to the desk. She smelled of vanilla, and, faintly, of mignonette. She glanced back at the chair and gestured slightly. It slid across to her. It must have been lifted a fraction of an inch off the floor, because it made no sound. She sat in it and said, “Do you think you’re going crazy?”

“No,” he said positively. “If that’s what you’re after, you’ve done everything wrong.”

“How so?”

He stretched out his legs. “I don’t know that you’ve earned a lecture on the secrets of my success. But I don’t mind telling you that I can be puzzled but not mystified. If I throw that switch, the hotplate lights up. I understand that. If Einstein tells me that light can only go just so fast, I don’t understand it, but I accept it. If another five yards shows up in that wallet I won’t understand it—” His fist came down with a crash—”and damn if I accept it. Now, quit your skylarking around, or—”

“Or?”

He shrugged, suddenly, and smiled. "Or make sense."

The smile, apparently, worked. She smiled too, and it was the first time. He'd seen a lot of wonderful things today, but nothing like this.

"Pour us a drink, and I'll talk sense."

"I haven't got any liq—" he began, and then caught the bare suggestion of an amused crinkle at the corners of her age-old eyes. He opened the top drawer, then remembered what he had done with the bottle. He scooped it up out of the wastepaper basket and held it up. It had about two fingers in it. He raised his eyebrows resignedly and found a couple of shot-glasses under "G" in the filing cabinet. He poured. There was just enough to fill both glasses, and when he put the bottle down there was about two fingers of liquor surging around the bottom.

They lifted their glasses. It didn't look like any rye he had ever seen. It had gold flecks which were in constant, dazzling motion, and it seemed to have an elusive blue cast to its gleaming amber. Her glass touched his, and one of her fingers, and he experienced a distinct and pleasant shock.

He drank.

For a split second he thought he had swallowed nothing at all, so smoothly did it go down. Then his earlobes warmed up like radiant heaters, and there came a feeling in his throat as if it had grown an internal pelt of finest mink.

"This you get for nothing?"

She shook her head. "From nothing. But it isn't easy."

"It's worth the trouble." He poured again. "Talk."

She lowered her eyes for a moment, then said, "I've been looking for you for a long time."

"I thought it was a stone you were looking for."

"Oh, it is. But you're the only man who can find it."

“There’re a lot of private eyes.”

“There’s only one like you.”

He turned on her suddenly. “You were smelling around the hospital records.”

She nodded. “I had to find something out.”

“Did you?”

“Yes.”

“Now you know why I’m so lucky.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know the old stories about the seventh son of a seventh son,” he said harshly. “Well, like a guy called Geosmith once said, I’m the seventh bastard of a seventh bastard.”

“Why do you make jokes that hurt you?”

“I like to be the first one to make ‘em. You get your nose rubbed in a thing like that.”

“And things like your real name?”

“You did snoop.”

“I had to know.”

“Why? To find that stone?”

“Yes,” she said. “You have it.”

“Not unless you planted it on me, like this cabbage.” He flicked the banknotes with his fingernail.

“You can be ever so sure I didn’t,” she said seriously. “I want it too badly. I just want to...” Her fingers curled. She had long slender, strong fingers. “...to hold that cup. Just to hold it in these two hands.”

He looked at her tense face wondering where all the cold poise

had gone. "Well, it ought to be a snap. I have it, you want it. Tell me where I've hidden it and I'll hand it over."

"I can't tell you where it is. You've got to find it yourself."

"I thought you were going to talk sense."

She sighed. "Has it dawned on you yet that this is a slightly unusual case?"

He glanced again at the money. "Seems so."

"Then you have to take what comes as sense. Guinn, is a radio set magic?"

"Not to me it isn't."

"But it would be to a bushman."

"Mmm. So now I'm a bushman. I see what you mean. You're using my own arguments on me. If there's anything I don't understand in all this, it's because I don't have the background for it. Don't worry, I'm not going to get superstitious."

"All right. But a lot of this is going to demand new thinking—a new kind of thinking from you."

"Do it to me."

"All right. You went up on the Hill today. You picked up a girl called Lynn. She'd had some trouble with a man named Mordi. When you got to Percival, you found him in terrible shape. He talked to you and then died. When you got back to your friend Garry, you found him wounded by this same Mordi. You then—"

"Now, wait. Were you there?"

"No."

"Then—"

"It was just something you had to go through."

"What are you talking about?"

"Shall I start again from the beginning? You are a very special person, Hadley Guinn. You, and only you can find that cup. And the

stone on it. Unless and until you find out who you are, you won't know where that cup is or how to find it. You can't be told—it's absolutely essential that you figure it out for yourself. In order to be able to figure it out, you've got to go through certain things. You'll keep on going through these things until you do figure it out—or die in the attempt. You already have all the evidence you need, but you won't look in the right direction. You've got a psychological block as big as a house that keeps you from it. You'll have to find it, or die. And if you're going to find it, it damn well better be soon!"

"Suppose I don't?"

"We...you...won't have to worry any more."

"I'm not worried now."

"Yes you are."

He studied his hands. "Yeah," he grunted. "You're right about that." He thought for a moment. "Those things I have to...go through. You mean like finding old Percival that way?"

She nodded. "And everything else that's happened since I walked in here."

"Sort of...staged?"

"You can call it that."

He pushed back his chair and stood up, looming over her like a cliff. "Did you have something to do with it?"

"Something."

"With what happened to Percival? To Garry?" His voice was rich with self-control.

She looked up at him with perfect composure. "Percival volunteered."

"Volun—for that!"

"He knew who you were. He's known for years. He's watched over

you and guided you more than you'll ever know. He knew what you were before I did—and I've known it for a long time. As for Garry, what happened to him had to happen, because you had to feel just that way about something. You're in a bigger play than you think you are. Now, sit down and stop blowing up like a sea squab, or I'll stick a pin in you and bust you."

Slowly, he sat down. "You better talk some more."

"I will. Lynn was in it for the same reason. Don't you see? Percival was the symbol of a lot of large issues to you. I don't have to draw you a diagram about them. They all came to a focus in him, and with his death they came front and center."

"Did he have to die that way?" growled Guinn.

"He did." She held up a commanding hand. "I told you—I'm 'talking sense', just as you asked me to. Damn you, you'll hold still for it. Garry is something you protect and teach, and he matters very much to you on those terms. You saved his life by your quick thinking, taking the car down the mountain face that way, getting him to the hospital in time—"

"You'll remember I stopped on the way."

"That was on the agenda. You had a choice to make, and you gave it to Lynn. You let her danger be more important to you than either Mordi or Garry's life."

"I suppose that strip act was part of it."

"Of course it was! You had to see how she reacted to you under circumstances that would have had her hysterical with anyone else. She trusted you because she could trust you—because you are you."

"Go on." His eyes were closed, his vision turned inwards.

"Cheryl," said the girl. "Someone who cared. Doctor Jim. Someone you trusted. And the ritual of the oak. Something you had to see."

"Why that?"

"Because, with a mind that refuses to see anything that isn't straight cause and effect, you had to witness effects with causes you'll never understand—and trust your own eyes! The same goes for the

money and this liquor. Pour me some more, by the way.”

There wasn't much in the bottle—only a couple of fingers. Resignedly, he poured, and filled his own glass.

“Miss Morgan,” he said carefully, “you are very beautiful and you have a great bag of tricks. But your story is as full of holes as a yard of cheesecloth. I don't know what you're after, but from where I sit you're a rich bitch with a warped sense of humor and an army of spies. Shut up!” he barked as her extraordinary eyes flamed with indignation.

“I still think Percival died because you've been wandering around yammering about some secret treasure he's supposed to've been on to. That's the kind of story that gets believed about eccentrics like him who've never given a hoot about money. I think you're responsible for his murder because of it. I don't know but what you hired Lynn to help you pull the wool over my eyes, to slip extra money into my wallet, to pull that fancy performance in the woods. I haven't figured out yet how half this sleight-of-hand was pulled, but I will. I'll sweat some of it out of Lynn and dope the rest out for myself.”

“Why, you—”

“If that fairy story of yours was true, that this whole thing was scripted out to put me through some paces, it'd mean outside circumstances that widen to where you couldn't have had a damn thing to do with them. What about the timing of that lowboy trailer—was that arranged?”

“Yes!”

He snorted. “The effect that old Percival had on me when I was a kid?”

“Yes!”

Sarcastically, he said, “The old oak tree growing just there?”

“Yes, yes, yes! All of it! How can I make you understand? Everything—the big things, like your being born when you were, like the building of the bridge just where it was, just that width—and the

little things—like old Joe being asleep when you got here, so that even when you were tired you climbed the steps rather than bother him. Like the first phone call you made being an arrangement to take of Percival's goats. You're you, damn it; but today, you've had to be more you than ever before. In every way that's important because you've got to realize who you are!"

Her intensity was like the radiation from a cherry-red ingot, a thing to narrow the eyes, against which to throw up futile hands. He shook his head in bewilderment. "Why do you go on with this?" he asked in genuine curiosity. "What's in it for you? Lady, how crazy can you get?"

She wrung her hands. "I can't tell you who you are," she mourned. "I can't, I can't...because if I did, that little wrinkle in your silly head would kink up and switch out all the circuits. You've been holding that knowledge locked up in your stubborn skull for years, and you won't look at it. You're born to the part, bred to it, trained for it, and you won't make the simple admission to yourself." She knitted her brows. Her full lower lip sucked in and her white teeth came down on it. She lowered her head and sat tensely, and a crystal tear welled out under her long lashes and lay twinkling on her high dark cheekbone.

He went to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "You've had a tough time, Miss Morgan," he said. His voice shook, and he realized with a shot of fury that her breakup had affected him more profoundly than he thought he was capable of.

She took his hand and pressed it against her wet cheek. "You're such a wonderful fool," she said brokenly.

He didn't know how his hand slid from her cheek to her throat. Her head came up abruptly and he found his eyes inches away from hers. Down, down in her eyes something glowed and called and promised. In those incredible eyes was a hunger, a yearning, and an overwhelming gladness fighting, fighting to emerge.

He stood like that for minutes. Finally he said hoarsely, "This won't gain you a thing. It won't make me believe a word of that...of yours." The word he used was filthy, viciously used.

"I know," she whispered. "It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter..."

And so the full spectrum was completed, and he was himself more than he had ever been before.

Lynn yawned. The office was swept. The files were in order, the furniture dusted, the waiting room davenport vacuumed and plumped, the paneling oiled. The bills were paid. The phone almost never rang, and when it did all she could do was note the caller's name and promise that Mr. Guinn would call back when he returned.

"Hey—Had! Are you—" There was a step.

Lynn leapt to her feet, smoothed her hair, and ran to the waiting room.

He was there, tall, stooped, a patch on his temple and a clump of bandage on his neck looking like a misplaced tuft of his cotton hair.

"Garry! Garry—oh!"

She was in his arms before he knew it. She hugged him until he grunted, put him away at arms' length, ran eager rapid fingers over his lips and cheeks.

"Wait a minute, hey—" he spluttered. He colored violently. "Lynn, I was hoping...I was thinking of some way to maybe see you again sometime...I didn't figger that—Gee. Hey."

"You idiot, you fool you," she crooned. "Darling, sit down. You must be tired. I thought you'd be in the hospital for another week. I've missed you so! You don't know, you just—oh, Garry, am I making a fool of myself? Am I?"

"Gosh," he said. "I don't think so." He put his hands awkwardly on her shoulders. "I think this is all right."

She spun in close to him, put her cheek on his chest. His heart was going like a riveting gun. They sat on the davenport and at last he kissed her.

At length he came up for air. "Ain't felt like this since I won the sack race at the county fair," he said. "Where's Had?"

"I don't know," she said.

"You working here now?"

She nodded. "He wanted me to, since that day. You know. He told me to call him and I did and he wasn't there. I felt real bad. And about ten in the morning old Sam came around. He brought me a note from Mr. Guinn and the keys. He said Mr. Guinn had sent him up to take care of Percival's goats—"

"He would," said Garry.

"Yes, and Mr. Guinn had come up early in the morning and told him to go."

"What did the note say?"

"I'll show you." She skipped into the office, opened a file drawer and came out with a crumpled piece of paper. "I'll read it."

"I've got some thinking to do. I'll be back shortly after I arrive. Don't look for me. Here are the keys. Straighten up the place for me. You'll find money in the top drawer of the desk. If you find any bills, pay them. If you get any calls, stall them. Take fifty a week for yourself and give Garry anything he needs.' Garry, I'm to give you anything you need."

"Haw!" grinned Garry. "He thinks of everything. That all?"

"No. 'If you see that Morgan girl, tell her I still don't believe her, but...' Here the writing gets all squiggly. '...but I'll keep looking until I find what she's after. And I almost think I might.' That's all."

"Have you seen the girl?"

"No. She hasn't so much as called. Who is she?"

"The most..." He flushed. "I like you better," he said lamely.

"You just better!"

"I bet I know where he is," said Garry. "Though maybe he wouldn't want to hang around there now. Still..."

“Where?”

“Still up there with the goats. He used to say that if ever he got mixed up in too much detail, that was the place to go. Said nobody could think little things up there.”

“That’s where we’ll start looking,” said a voice, and it laughed.

Garry and Lynn sprang apart, and then Lynn cowered up close against Garry.

Standing in the doorway was a dark, spare man with cold black eyes. His left arm was in a splint, though not in a sling. His jacket was draped over his left shoulder, and its drape gave him a chilling, vampire look. In his right hand was a heavy automatic.

“Mordi!”

“The whole thing suits me fine,” said Mordi. “Nothing’s going sour this time, buster. I want to be the first to congratulate you. You got a chick that will look at you, and I got a gun that will look at the chick. There’s nothing you can do so fast that I can’t—” He described the process of shooting Lynn in terms that made Garry’s lips go white.

“What do you want?”

“Same thing your boss wants. Either I get it first or he does. If he does, I get it right afterward. Come on, lovebirds. We’re taking a trip.” His black eyes slitted. “And look, little smarty, you better just follow my instructions and not pull another fast one, because I’m not holding this gun for fun.”

Garry took a step toward him and Lynn flung her arms around him. “Garry, don’t, don’t...”

Guinn threw the old book aside and stretched. “Morning, Matty,” he smiled.

The nanny stretched her long neck further inside the cave. “Eh-eh-eh!” she answered.

“Okay, okay.”

He rolled off the goat-hair mattress and stooped to go through the entrance. The nanny skipped away from him and stopped again a few feet out in the clearing. "Eh-eh."

"I'm coming, honey."

He followed the goat through the neck of woods to the meadow. "Oh, for Pete's sake! Can't you stay out of trouble? You want to grow up to be a detective?" He strode over to the ruins of an ancient fieldstone wall. Tangled in a whip-vine was a week-old kid. Its clumsy thrashings had brought it under a flat stone which had fallen across a rock and a stump in such a way that the little animal was caught, painlessly, but effectively, under the stone with its legs spraddled out and its silly head springing up out of the shrubbery like a barrage balloon. "Up you come," said Guinn, heaving the rock away. He picked up the kid and freed its legs from the vine. It bawled shrilly, and the nanny fretted impatiently beside him. He set the kid down and it staggered to the nanny and hooked on to a teat with exaggerated smackings and droolings and a series of frantic, contented little grunts. Guinn chuckled and walked away.

The mist was a sea which had turned the hills into a wind-borne archipelago. There had been sun up here for two hours, but the valleys were still submerged, asleep. Guinn breathed the good air and let his gaze reach and reach into the indeterminate area where mist and sky met. Eight days of this had brought a great peace and purpose to him, and for forty-eight hours now he had even forgotten that he was out of cigarettes.

The goats were company and a modicum of trouble, anchoring him to a duty. The sky and the stars and the sun and rain were things he could drift in, but the goats never let him lose himself. It was a good place to be, a good way to be.

And the books...

"...There was a man spawned by the powers of darkness, born of a virgin, destined to be the antichrist. And the virgin Blaise told her confessor, who believed when others would not, and baptized the child, taking him from the control of his dark father..."

"...asleep under a rock in Barenton in Brittany amongst the hawthornes. And when the rain fails them, then do the peasants call to him, and strike the rock, and he calls down succor for the thirsty land."

(What was it he had heard about Barenton? Oh yes; when that Morgan girl had first come in: “Reckon it’ll rain tomorrow?” and she had said, not in Barenton.” And he had asked, “Where’s Barenton?” and she had said “Sorry. Classical reference. There’s a hawthorne hush there.”)

“...a precious stone is brought to earth by angels, and committed to the guardianship of a line of kings. It is self-acting and food-providing, and the light issuing from it extinguishes the light of candles. No man may die within eight days of beholding it, and the weeping maiden who bears it retains perennial youth...”

(So if there’s a drought at Barenton, he’s no longer under the stone...)

He went back into the cave to read some more. Lovely, lovely stuff, those legends. What had turned him from them?

(The echoes in his mind, the jeering kids at school. The smug young substitute teacher who had labeled his desk after an absence “The Siege Perilous”—the old name given the empty place at a great table when a knight was out searching for the...for the...)

Before noon he heard the scuttle of hooves and the sharp snort of the big billy called Bucko.

He ran outside. Bucko was on the high bluff behind the cave. Guinn scrambled up the rocks. “Easy, Bucko,” he said. Bucko turned to him and back toward the forest, his great head high, his heavy horns curving down and back so that the tips all but touched his massive shoulders.

Guinn stood up and peered. He could see nothing, hear nothing—wait; there was a sound. A distant groan, a complex sound.

It was the whining of a car in low gear, traveling rough ground so that the driver’s foot bounced on the accelerator.

The sound came closer. Guinn automatically reached for his armpit and cursed. His gun was in the cave with his clothes. He hadn’t had them on in four days; why bother? The goats didn’t mind...

He turned to go down when a brilliant flash caught his eye—the sun on chrome. Then he knew that by the time he gained the cave again the car would be in the clearing. Strangers or friends—fine. He could put something on and come out to greet them. But if this visitor were no stranger, and no friend...

He'd take his chances out here in the open.

The car pulled into the clearing. Guinn knelt behind the gray peak of rock that jutted up like a chimney, and froze. From the ground he would look like another conformation of the rocks silhouetted against the bright sky.

The car door opened. It was a Nash sedan. Garry was driving. He got out and walked straight away from the car for perhaps ten feet when, at a low growl from the car, he stopped. He stood still, trembling. Even from that distance Guinn could see the sweat standing out on his forehead.

The rear door opened. Lynn got out. Her face was chalky, and her red-gold hair was vivid against it. She was staring straight ahead, and her eyes were as round as an auger-hole.

Behind her came Mordi, crouching, watchful. He kept an automatic steadily on the girl. Guinn could hear his voice clearly as it grated, echoed among the rocks.

"All right, cottonhead. Peek inside. If he's there, call him out."

Garry stood still, and the torment on his face was indescribable.

The automatic barked, and a slug whined twice in a crazy double ricochet. Garry whirled. Lynn snatched at her skirt, whimpering. She fingered a bullet hole in her skirt, low on her hip. "No!" she cried to Garry. "It didn't touch me!"

"The next one will," promised Mordi faithfully. "Go on, cottonhead."

Garry stalked forward like a zombie. Mordi closed with Lynn, putting the muzzle of his gun against her back. They followed.

Garry stooped and disappeared in the cave. He was out in a moment. "He isn't there."

"He's been there," said Mordi.

"No."

"You're a liar." He shoved Lynn so hard with the gun that she stumbled. Mordi stood back until she was on her feet again. Then he snapped, "Inside, Sister!" He pushed her roughly into the opening. "You," he said to Garry, "stand right where you are, where I can see you. One step any way, and I start shooting." He ducked into the cave.

Guinn was suddenly conscious of pain in his hands, and he took them off the rock. One fingernail was broken and bleeding. He looked down. Garry was standing stiff and trembling in the clearing in front of the cave-mouth. Guinn thought of leaping down from the rock, landing on Garry, bearing him away from the cave-mouth, and then realized that it wasn't Garry that Mordi would start shooting at.

He looked around frantically.

There was a movement in the wood.

Someone, palefaced, slender, stood in the shadows. Clad in a mottled green cloak, she was all but invisible. When his eyes rested on her face, it relaxed visibly, as if she had been standing in an agony of tension, waiting for him to see her.

"Morgan!"

(The memory flitted through his tortured mind. "What's your first name?" "Morgan." "All right, if you don't want to tell me.")

"Morgan..." he breathed. "Morgan le Fay..."

She nodded. She raised something in her hands—a three-foot clump of evergreen with yellow-green flowers, a cluster of white berries...

("...and when the missal shall be found upon the oak, then shall the Druid sever it with a golden knife. And sacrifice shall be made, the living blood feeding the roots of the tree...")

She stepped out into the clearing at the side of the outcropping, and with one clean sweep of her arm, she threw the mistletoe.

Guinn stood, stretched, and caught it. Two fierce thoughts collided in his mind. The first was that this was no time for kissing games; he'd a damn sight rather had an automatic rifle than this shrubbery. The other sprang from the remembered passage in Percival's old book: "...when the missal shall be found upon the oak, then shall the Druid..."

Druid. The Druid.

Percival had muttered, through his tattered tongue, something about the Druid. The one Guinn was to find. The one who had a golden knife, who had said "When you admit you know me, you shall seek me out."

His name! What in time was his name?

The hawthorne bush...under a flat stone in Barenton, in Brittany, he sleeps...But there is a drought in Brittany. He sleeps no longer.

Percival's bloody wreck of a mouth floated before his eyes. "Amghozhiush..."

"Amgro—Ambrozhi—Ambrosius. Merlin Ambrosius!"

In his mind, he screamed it, over and over.

Hollowly, Mordi's voice boomed out below. "You lying bastard! He was here! His clothes, his gun—I'll teach you to lie to me!"

The automatic roared once and again. Coming from the cave, it sounded like artillery. Garry put his arms out, and on his face was an expression of delighted amazement that distorted itself into a tormented, rubbery grimace. "But, Lynn," he said softly. He looked down at his chest, and suddenly there were two bright splotches on his shirt. Chin on chest, he vomited blood on the splotches and toppled.

A horrible garble of sound came from the cave—Mordi's roar of laughter and Lynn's terrible shriek. She bolted out into the open. Mordi was after, on her in two bounds. He twisted one arm behind her until she fell to her knees, then struck her on the back of the neck with his splinted forearm. She collapsed without a sound.

Guinn uttered a low growl—precisely the sound made by a furious mastiff. He tensed and sprang—

And he couldn't move.

He looked up.

Standing beside him, with one gigantic arm extended and an expression of perfect calm on his dark face, stood the Druid—the man he had seen cut the mistletoe from the oak tree.

“You called me,” he said. His tones rang, but somehow Guinn knew he couldn't be heard by Mordi.

“Let me go,” said Guinn between his teeth. “Damn you to hell, let me go!”

The Druid was not touching him, but there was no question of the fact that the paralysis came from that extended arm. “Stand up,” said the giant.

Slowly, Guinn stood up. “Let me go,” he said again. “Garry's dying!”

“He will die if you do not do as I say,” said the giant.

Guinn gritted his teeth and, as if moving in a heavy fluid, turned and glanced down. Mordi was working over Garry, lifting him, dragging him. He could hear Garry's bubbling breath and weak coughs. Peering down, Guinn saw him prop the dying man in a sitting position at the cave-mouth, facing in.

“A lung job,” gasped Mordi. “You'll go slowly, buster. Which is good. There's something I'll want you to watch.”

He went out into the clearing and picked up Lynn's limp form—both wrists in one hand, a twist under her so that she was draped over his right shoulder. He half carried, half dragged her into the cave. There was the sound of tearing cloth. “We'll get this out of the way, hey, smarty?”

Garry tried to speak, but blood choked him.

Guinn whimpered in frustration as the invisible power drew at him, turned him around to face the great, calm, kindly face of the Druid.

“Your Quest,” said Merlin Ambrosius. “There is nothing more important than your Quest. End your search and you shall have your heart’s desire.”

The calm power flowed into him from that huge face. Suddenly, without effort, he understood. He understood it all, from all its beginnings to its incredible present to all possible endings. He put up his hands and closed his eyes.

There was a flow from the Druid to his whole being, and an answering flow up through the rocks from the core of the earth itself. There was an emanation from everything that lived around him—the trees, the grass, the silent goats that stared up at him as once oxen stared up at a Star. Butterflies sank to the earth and were still, and all the birds were with him, silently striving.

In his empty hands he felt a weight. He pulled his mind together and threw it all into a mighty effort; and his thumbs curled over something carven, and there was a high center of gravity there, so that he must balance what he held.

Then he knew it was done, and that out of himself and the earth and all things which had ever lived, the Search he had made all his life (most of it unwittingly) was over. He and his substance had been the assembly point for the thing which had left its mysterious mark on all histories and all myths.

He opened his eyes, and was not dazzled by its light, though it was far brighter than that of the high sun.

It was a chalice, apparently filled with wine. It was infinitely graceful, and each curve and carven line had a basic meaning.

There was a clinking and a rustle, and a weight on his shoulders, and a mighty, comforting burden around his waist. He found himself clad in golden chain-mail, marvelously made. It was covered by a long white silken surplice, and it blazed in the light of the unbelievable stone set in the cup.

“Will you yield it to me?” asked Merlin. His great dark eyes were full of years and hunger and...and supplication. There was no power in him to take this cup.

Guinn turned, looked down. Garry sagged against the rocks.

But Guinn was free now. He leaped. He had one brief glimpse of Merlin’s pleading hands, and then he struck the ground jarringly.

“Mordred!” he cried in a great voice. “Come out!”

The answer was a shot that roared from the open throat of the cave. Guinn saw, to his amazement, a .45 slug appear in midair three inches away from the cup he still held, and, flattening, fall to the ground.

Mordi had apparently fired before he looked, for he now came out of the cave. His clothes were disheveled and his dark face was flushed. “Well, well. If it isn’t the pure boy himself, all dressed up for Sunday. All right—give it here.”

From the corner of his eye, Guinn saw Morgan moving forward, like a stalking cat.

“Throw down that gun,” said Guinn.

Mordi laughed. He raised the gun and sighted it carefully at Guinn’s forehead, and pulled the trigger.

The gun bucked in his hand.

He stared at it, unbelievably. It was melting. It was falling together like a water-filled balloon with a fast leak. It flowed and dripped down and ran between his fingers. There was no heat. It simply melted.

He looked up, saw Morgan. She had a strange, luminous smile on her face, and was looking up at the peak of the rock. Mordi looked up too.

Merlin stood there, his arms folded. “Would you kill the bearer of the Grail?”

Mordi cursed. He shook his fist at the giant and bellowed: "I, Mordred pen Dragon, of the true line of the Kings of pen Dragon, Guardians of the Grail, I am your master, Merlin Ambrosius, and you are committed to my service. I command you to deliver it to me!"

Morgan gasped. Guinn, startled, looked at her. "It's true, it's true," she keened. Tears streamed down her face.

"Quickly," she said. She ran to him. "Give me the Grail. You can't kill while you hold it." He hesitated only a fraction of a second, and then thrust it into her hands. Her face matched the Grail's radiance as she took it.

Mordi made a lunge for her, but she skipped back out of the way, and that was when Guinn's fist hit him. It bowled him right off his feet and up against the rock.

Guinn leaped on him. Mordi, with his back to the rock, lashed out with both feet and caught Guinn on his mailed chest. Guinn went flying backwards, to land in a tangle of surplice and chain, with his heavy two-handed sword twined into the heap. Mordi leaped on him, kicked at his head. Guinn ducked, and the heel of Mordi's shoe cut a long crease in his scalp. Guinn rolled over, got his feet under him and tossed the surplice back out of the way. He advanced on Mordi.

"Merlin, your protection!" screamed Mordi.

"To my sorrow," said the giant, and his voice was like the theme of a dirge. He threw up his hands.

Guinn loosed a straight right that had all the power of his blood, bones and hatred behind it.

And it was as if there were a wall of plexiglass between him and Mordi. The fist bounced off nothingness, and the diverted blow threw Guinn down on one knee. His arm tingled to the shoulder. He bobbed to his feet and circled, warily. He rushed, and was again warded off.

"Now this," said Mordi, "is real fun." He dropped his hands. "Come in again, brother bastard. Did I ever tell you how many guys tried to be your father?"

From the cave-mouth, Garry coughed, and from the sound of it, it would be about his last. Morgan, carrying the Grail, darted to him, pulled his head back, thrust the glowing chalice in front of his glazing eyes. Over her shoulder she cried, "Your sword! Use your sword!"

The sword, to Guinn, was no more than a nuisance. He hadn't had time to look at the buckle nor to fumble with it, or he would have shucked it off to get it out of the way. But so far Morgan had been right. He backed off and drew the sword. Merlin and Morgan, having seen such things done before with skill, must have been appalled. Guinn had to run it out of the scabbard hand under hand down the blade before he could get it all the way out.

He got his hands on the long hilt, and the weapon seemed to take on a life of its own. Mordi staggered back a pace or two and raised his arms.

"Merlin—protect me!"

The glittering blade went up, back, and to one side, and came forward in a screaming arc.

"Protect me—"

"Against Excalibur? " said the giant, his great voice shaking with laughter. And then the blade struck Mordi's neck and passed through it as if it had been a puff of smoke.

The body stood upright for fully two seconds, a pulsing fountain of blood replacing the head. Then it fell. The head rolled over twice and stopped at Guinn's feet, the eyelids batting flirtatiously, the tongue running in and out like that of a rude little boy.

Merlin came down from the crest. Guinn did not see him do it. It was as if he had disappeared from the top and reappeared at the bottom. Perhaps that was the case.

From his robe he produced a silver chain. He held out a hand to Morgan, and she came to him, walking mechanically, and stopped before him with her head down.

"On the day the Grail passes from the guardianship of the pen Dragons," Merlin intoned, "Morgan le Fay, called the Wild, shall be chained and given into slavery."

He cast one end of the chain to Morgan's slender wrist. It nestled

there as if drawn by some magnetism, and by some marvel that Guinn did not understand, formed what appeared to be a broad silver link about her wrist.

“We don’t have slaves,” Guinn said stupidly.

Morgan knelt at his feet. “She is yours if you wish it,” said Merlin.

Leaning on his great sword, Guinn reached and took the chain. “Stand up, Morgan,” he said. “You embarrass me.” He tugged at the chain. “Merlin, take this thing off her.”

Merlin sighed. “As you wish.” He made the slightest of gestures and the chain fell away. “But I warn you—she is called the Wild for good reason. She is that which appears to be something else. She is the very source of the term ‘fey.’”

“Wild I may be,” said Morgan in a low voice, “but I feel I shall be tamed for this one’s lifetime—yes, and all his others.”

Guinn walked to the cave-mouth and knelt by Garry. “He’s still alive! If only we could get him to a doctor!”

“There will be time,” said Morgan, with a peculiar quirk to her mouth.

There was a moan from the cave. Guinn bent and peered in. He turned and took the Grail from Morgan. “Give her a hand,” he said, and turned away.

Merlin stood looking hungrily at the Grail. “May I drink?”

Guinn looked at him quizzically. “I don’t know, Merlin,” he said honestly. “I’m going to need a whole mess of indoctrination here. I don’t know what I should or shouldn’t do.”

“It will do nothing but good, believe me.”

“Can’t you wait a bit?”

“Ay.” Merlin heaved an enormous sigh. “But after waiting near two thousand years, it isn’t easy.”

Lynn stumbled out of the cave. Her clothes were torn, and there were ugly fingernail scratches on her shoulders. She flung herself on Garry and lay in a twisted ecstasy of tortured sobs.

Morgan knelt and held her. "Give her the Grail," she said urgently to Guinn. "Make her walk with it while she weeps. While she weeps!"

Guinn gently lifted the sobbing girl. "Lynn, honey. Here. Here—take this."

Lynn strained toward Garry. Guinn tilted her face up and only then did she see his shining armor and great sword. She blinked in surprise. And then the radiance of the Grail suffused her. She put out her hands blindly and he gave it to her.

"Here, dear," called Morgan from a short distance.

Her sobs gradually subsiding, Lynn walked to her and gave her the chalice. Morgan took it, narrowed her eyes, and suddenly the astonished Lynn was arrayed in a beautifully draped Grecian dress.

"Now, what was that for?" asked Guinn.

Merlin smiled. "Don't you remember the qualities of the Grail? 'The weeping maiden who bears it shall retain perennial youth.' Morgan is a woman with the values and compassions of a woman."

"Oh, yes," said Guinn devoutly, remembering his last meeting with Morgan. "Merlin, help me out of this hardware."

"So be it," said Merlin. He reached out and took the sword, and the golden chain-mail vanished, surplice and all.

"Hey!" Guinn yelled, and dove into the cave. He found his clothes and pulled them on.

"How do you feel, boy?"

They were in the car, working gently down the switchback road toward the town. Garry lay on the wide back seat, with his head on Lynn's lap. Morgan and Guinn were in front. (Merlin, who scorned any mechanical transportation, was left behind "to take care of the goats," he had said. Morgan had explained to him that old Sam would find

the goats in an empty lot near his place in town. “You’ll understand how, one day.”)

Garry grinned weakly. “I feel pretty damn itchy,” he said. “But I’m gonna be all right.”

Guinn glanced quickly at Morgan and she nodded. “He will be. No man can die within eight days once he’s seen the Grail.”

Guinn glanced into the rear-view mirror again. There was no doubt of the fact that Garry was alive and chipper.

“Okay,” he said, “I’ve been in the dark altogether too damn much. Let’s have it. Where did all this start?”

She smiled, and touched his shoulder. “It’s a big thing and requires big thinking, darling.”

“I can try.”

She settled back in her seat. “Well, first, you’ve got to get used to the idea of a race of beings so enormous, so powerful, that you can’t fully comprehend them. You just have to know they’re there.”

“Gods?”

“Do ants think elephants are gods? Do birds think locomotives are gods? By all means believe in God, but if you do, do Him the justice to believe that he is a God to the Great Beings as well.”

“Theology later,” said Guinn. “Go on.”

“When it became evident that this planet would support such as we, the Great Ones supplied guidance for us. They put it on Earth and went on. It is not their custom to stop and watch a civilization grow. They do what they do in order to prevent imbalances that might disrupt little corners of the universe. Once a race in this very system blew up its planet, you know. Their balances prevent that. Or they should. And now they will again.”

“What is this—guidance?”

“A permeating, controlling force for each of the great basics of life: growth and decay. A better way of putting it is the anabolism and the catabolism which together comprise metabolism. There is a force that builds and a force that destroys; one that delivers heat and one

that absorbs it. It's light and dark. It's yin and yang, the oldest symbol known to man—a circle divided in two by the S-shaped line inside of it, one half light, one half dark.”

“Good and evil.”

“No!” she said explosively. “Not that! Good and evil are erroneous human concepts that derive from the terrible mistake that was made here.”

“What mistake?”

“Mythology contains many a mention of it, though few regard it as the disaster it was. You see, only one of these forces has been fully operating on earth. The other is crippled, subdued.”

“What happened?”

Morgan wrinkled her brow. “First, let me explain what the effect of this imbalance is. If you put a cup on a table, and extend your hand to pick it up, you are moving directly toward an established aim. If you shove your arm all the way, as far as it will go, you'll push the cup all the way across and send it crashing to the floor on the other side. Yet no one can deny that your force was applied to the desired end, in the right direction, with the correct motivations.

“There is nothing evil or dangerous or harmful on this planet except excess. There's no such thing as a deadly poison; there's just too much of a poison. Too much pleasure is pain; too much fear (a fine survival characteristic) or too much anger (and that's another) means madness.”

“I think I see. Then which of these powers was crippled?”

“The power of darkness—destruction—anabolism.”

“You're out of your head! This planet's loaded with it!”

She shook her head sagely. “It's building—building gone out of control. It's the cause of technology's outstripping the spirit. Every nation that smashes every other nation does it through a desire to construct something—a political philosophy, an empire, a personal

fortune or a personal power. It's construction that's killing us off. It's cancer!"

"I never thought of it that way."

"Humans don't. How can they? They're born to it. But that can all be changed. It's up to you."

"Me?"

"You. Only you have the power to give the Grail to Merlin."

"What has that to do with it?"

"Remember your reading about him? What was his parentage?"

"He was—he was born of a virgin."

"That's right. That is the way the guidances are placed on a planet. Merlin's the antichrist—yes. But don't recoil from that word. I tell you it has nothing to do with evil—everything to do with balance."

"What would the world be like with that force in it?"

"That requires a whole new system of thought. It's hard to put into human language. Have you ever heard of someone committing a crime for his own benefit?"

"All the time."

"Well, try to imagine a culture in which it would be impossible to construct that sentence, because 'crime' and 'benefit' couldn't exist in the same idea-sequence!"

He was quiet for a long time. At last he said, "Mankind as a unit of free things, eh? Each with the full consciousness of the whole species?"

She shrugged. "Action is a light force, inhibition a dark one. The name you have for rational inhibition is conscience. Imagine all mankind with a cohesive conscience, and you'll get the picture."

Guinn wet his lips. “And what about you? And the Druids?”

“There’s a long word for me. I’m a metempsychotic. I get transferred complete from one body to another, with complete memory. That’s how I can do the things I do. None of it’s magic. It’s just that for me there have been no dark ages. It’s all soundly scientific. The money in your wallet? A kind of teleportation. The chair that moved by itself? Telekinesis.

“The same thing’s true of the Druids. ‘Druid’ isn’t the name of a religious sect, by the way; it’s a title, like ‘chancellor’ or ‘minister’. They’re metempsychotics too, but for the dark powers. I’m neutral. I imagine I’m a sort of recording device for the Great Ones.”

“And how did the one force get crippled?”

“These guidances are put among humans in human terms. The antichrist was baptized! His mother confessed her visitation to a man who had the power to do it. And that is Merlin—fully possessed of the dark powers, but unable to use them for their intended purposes!”

“And the Grail?”

“Pure and simple, a power source. That jewel is a reservoir of vital energy. It was left in charge of a line of kings—the most cohesive form of authority at that time—and of them, the revered Arthur pen Dragon...I hope I’m not knocking over any childhood idols.”

“Not mine,” said Guinn sullenly.

“King Arthur was a petty, self-righteous little martinet with a weak mind and a strong arm. He fell in accord with a renegade Druid who got him to turn the Grail completely to the powers of light. It shouldn’t be denied them, of course; but neither should it be monopolized. The Grail itself, in its symbolized chalice form, was put into an immaterial form, keyed to the very special aura of a certain kind of man, a man who couldn’t exist as long as the dark powers were crippled!

“So we—Merlin and I—searched until we found suitable material, and then made what environmental changes we could until we got one. You. Percival almost made it, but not quite. He wasn’t—well—dirty enough.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s been tough sledding. Merlin had to keep his powers under forced draft by any means he could. That ritual you saw is one of the ways. The combination of auras of hypnotized animals, a virgin, oak, mistletoe and fresh-killed mammals is a tremendous recharge. With the Grail it won’t be necessary.”

“And Mordi?”

“A madman. Happened to be a genealogist and found that he was of the true pen Dragon stock—the last of the pure line, most fortunately. Got to fooling around with old rituals and found that the Druids, even Merlin himself, were bound to him. He wanted the Grail as a personal power-source—which, God knows, it certainly is.”

Guinn drove thoughtfully for a while. Then, “I called him Mordred.” Morgan laughed. “There may be more pattern behind this than anyone—even Merlin and I—know. For we have a Gareth and his Lynette; we had a Percival, the good man who almost had the Grail. And Mordred, the deputy King who turned so evil.”

“There was a gasp from the back seat. Lynn said, “Mordi—he saw the Grail. He’ll live eight days?”

“At least,” said Morgan cheerfully. And Guinn, holding the wheel, saw a flash of that bodiless head, blinking and tonguing up at him. Then he thought of Gary propped up against the cave entrance, dying, and watching...and he drove without speaking.

“So it’s up to you, chum,” said Morgan. “Give Merlin the Grail, and restore some balance to this rock, or don’t, and we’ll keep on building Babel.”

“Excalibur and the atom, is that it? Wait. The atom bomb is a disruptive dark-power device if anything ever was. Right?”

“Right,” said Morgan. “A feeble victory for Merlin’s side. It’s the H-bomb we’re worried about. That’s fusion—that’s building. Darling, if you give Merlin the Grail, that damned thing...won’t...work!”

Garry said, weakly, “Hey, boss. Just who are you?”

When Guinn didn’t answer, Morgan laughed and said, “He’s

Hadley Guinn. He got his last name from the only name anyone knew his mother by. It was Guinevere. He called himself Hadley because he got sick and tired of getting kidded about his real name.” She hugged him. “In a couple thousand years, he’ll get over that.”

Guinn took a deep breath and said it, all by himself—the one word that had been anathema to him all his life, that had poisoned the whole Round Table legend for him.

“Galahad,” he said. “By God, I’m Galahad, that’s who I am!”

And when they test the H-bomb, you’ll know what he decided.

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